

Imaginative Tales #5 THE MIRACLE OF RONALD WEEMS by Robert Bloch MAY, 1955

Imaginative
Tales #5

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THE MIRACLE OF RONALD WEEMS

by Robert Bloch



Introducing the



AUTHOR



Daniel F. Galouye



AFTER writing "thirty" to news story Number Thirteen or Fourteen Thousand, the average (or should we say restless?) newspaperman is abruptly seized with a disillusioning realization: News isn't really news! Conceding that accounts of public occurrences differ over any short period of time, I hasten to point out it becomes quite apparent after a few years' typewriter-tickling that all stories fall in categories and that after Category Eleven-C has been written for the umpteenth time it is stripped of all its novel aspects. News writing then becomes a matter of selecting appropriate forms from an imaginary file and filing in names, addresses, dates and times to suit the particular occasion.

What does acquisition of such a

conviction do to the restless newsman? Many of them look back on the recently written story and imagine the element that could have been added, or the situation that could have been strengthened to justify the seldom-proved adage, "Truth is stranger than fiction."

At any rate, the prospective tedium was what, in my case, stimulated speculative thinking. A news story became the beginning of a plot. The reform candidate became a protagonist; the lecturer, a villain; the Texas City explosion, not an explosion at all but an attack from space; hurricanes whipping inland from the Gulf—malevolent, intelligent entities whom we could not recognize as such because of inadequate perception.

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**JULY ISSUE
ON SALE
MAY 5th**

The Editorial.....

WE'VE received so many letters from readers of the earlier issues asking that we institute various departments and features in TALES that we've decided to follow in the footsteps of our big sister publication, IMAGINATION, and follow through on your requests.

SO this issue inaugurates our new policy. We're stepping off with an informative author introduction, this initial editorial, various articles, and, of course, the funniest cartoons of a science-fantasy nature you'll find anywhere!

ONE of the big features you'll really want, of course, is a letter column. We plan to oblige here too. So from now on get your letters in fast each issue. We don't intend to limit your discussion subjects in any way; that will be your own private department and you're the boss. So fire away!

WE'LL naturally be interested in hearing further suggestions you may have on other departments, such as fan columns, book review sections, etc. So let us know your views and we'll try and please the majority.

YOU'LL note that in TALES we're stressing the long length story rather than a number of shorter yarns. In this respect we'll

differ from our sister magazine, IMAGINATION, in an effort to bring you the finest novels by the top writers. We'll mix up humor and dramatic themes, as in this issue, and provide what we hope will be a well - balanced diet for your reading pleasure.

OUR covers, as always, will be the finest in the science-fantasy field—again, with the possible exception of IMAGINATION! In short you can count on the best, and that friendly atmosphere you want in your favorite magazines. And we're proud to be one of them! wh



"Either he's off course—or we are!"



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The Miracle of Ronald Weems

by

Robert Bloch

THINGS were very quiet in ladies' underwear that morning.

Nothing was going on in panties, either. Girdles held up fairly well, but brassieres were sagging.

So was Ronald Weems.

He stared across the counter and down the third-floor aisle of Lacey's Department Store and muttered to himself. "Bloomers!" he sighed. "I'm sick of them!"

The small man meant it. He was bored with bloomers, fed up with frillies, petulant about petticoats.

Five years as Assistant Buyer in Ladies' Lingerie had left a lasting mark on the man.

Aside from that, Ronald Weems' soul was as spotless as an angel's wing. And perhaps that was the actual cause of his discontent. Normally, a man of thirty manages to acquire at least a few interesting stains and blemishes, suitable for a spiritual dry-cleaning. But Ronald Weems had led an immaculate life.

His maiden aunts — now deceased — had seen to that. They belonged to the Old School, as they

As salesman rate, Ronald was a fair brassiere man; but he was a whiz at chemistry sets—especially ones containing alcohol—which sent him flying high!



never ceased telling Ronald throughout his adolescence and early manhood.

Ronald didn't know precisely what they meant by the Old School. He visualized it vaguely as a place where rigid rules were neatly and impeccably written down in a firm hand on shiny, sterile blackboards. Rules like *"Don't - forget - to - wear - your - rubbers - it - looks - like - we - might - get - some - rain"* and *"Please - wipe - your - feet - before - you - come - in"* and *"Never-smoke - in - the - parlor - it - makes-the - curtains - smell."*

Fortunately for them, the maiden aunts had shuffled (ever so sedately, though) off this mortal coil just prior to Ronald's promotion to Ladies' Lingerie, five years ago. They would never have approved of their nephew working in proximity to feminine underthings. In fact, one of their chief aims in life had been to keep him far, far away from feminine underthings in any form — or feminine forms in any underthings.

And they had succeeded, Ronald now mused, only too well. For although five long years had passed since their passing, Ronald was still living according to the rules of the Old School. He had bought and sold millions of pairs of hosiery, and never once handled a leg. He knew nothing of limbs — except

for the vague awareness that he was now out on one.

For Ronald was in love.

At least he thought he was in love. The combination of sleeplessness, stomach palpitation, hot flushes and nervous excitement is often diagnosed by physicians as hyperacidity. But Ronald didn't feel as though he needed a physic. He felt as though he needed Amy Cooper.

Amy Cooper worked upstairs, in Toys. She looked rather like a toy herself — one of those chubby, cuddly yellowhaired plush kittens — although Ronald had never dared tell her so. Any more than he had ever dared rush up to her and say, "Look, honey, my stomach's upset. Let's get married."

He had danced with her at the Annual Employee's Ball, taken her to the movies a half-dozen times, and dined with her at the cafeteria upstairs. He had always behaved like a perfect gentleman, which is a polite way of saying he'd never gotten to first base.

Ronald was perfectly sure that his maiden aunts would have approved of his conduct, and he couldn't quite figure out why Amy Cooper didn't seem to. It had never occurred to him that Amy wasn't a maiden aunt.

Nevertheless, on this particular November morning, Ronald Weems was conscious of a sudden heart-

burn which reminded him of two things — it was almost time for lunch, and he wanted very much to see Amy.

Noting that the floor was almost deserted, save for the clerks and a few unstylishly stout customers who were obviously Just-looking-Thank-You, Ronald darted through the side doorway and into the office of his immediate superior.

QUENTIN Bickerstaff thrust his square jaw over the edge of his square desk. "Ah, Weems, there you are! Wondered where you'd been keeping yourself. Everything all set for this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir. I've had all the chairs put out, and the electricians are working on the lighting."

"Umph," Bickerstaff commented. "I want everything perfect, understand? There must be no hitches."

"I'm sure you'll find we're well prepared, sir." Ronald stared at the big THINK! and SMILE! signs on the office-wall and caught himself wondering why it was that Mr. Bickerstaff never seemed to do either. He banished the disloyal thought immediately and coughed discreetly.

"Do you imagine I could take an early lunch hour?" he asked.

"Lunch?" Mr. Bickerstaff's eye-

brows rose like astonished caterpillars. "How can you think of lunch at a time like this? When the whole fate of our Department hangs on the success or failure of this afternoon's style show?" He slammed his fist on the desk, causing the SMILE! sign to rattle violently against the wall. "Do you realize how far we're behind on our girdle quota for the year? Do you know we're overstocked by at least eight thousand brassieres — four thousand of them in A-cups alone?"

He glowered at Ronald, then sighed. "But I suppose you don't care," he said, bitterly. "You're a young man. Brassieres mean nothing to you. You're more interested in filling your stomach than in filling A-cups."

"But everything's taken care of —" Ronald ventured.

"I know." Bickerstaff nodded. "That's not the point. The point is, Weems, you'll never get anywhere in this line. I can see it now. You haven't the *feel* for Ladies' Linerie. Maybe you belong in Nighties."

"Oh, don't say that, Mr. Bickerstaff!" Ronald cried. "I love my work, you know that. I'm very happy in Negligees and Briefs, believe me I am."

"It isn't enough to love this Department," Bickerstaff declared. "You have to *live* it. Now take me, for example. While you're con-

cerned only about food, I am thinking only of brassieres. Night and day, that's all I have on my mind. And I won't rest until I somehow manage to put those eight thousand brassieres where they belong — in the hands of our customers."

"But brassieres don't belong on hands," Ronald objected.

"I *know* that," Mr. Bickerstaff flushed slightly. "It's just a figure of speech. What I mean to say is, I think of it as my mission in life to find eight thousand women who need brassieres—four thousand of them for A-cups. And if there aren't four thousand, maybe they can be squeezed into them. Where there's a will there's a way."

"What way would you suggest?" Ronald asked, genuinely interested. "Some sort of shoe-horn, perhaps?"

"Ohhh—" Bickerstaff wailed, "Go to lunch!" As the younger man headed for the door he called after him, "But no dawdling. Back at one, promptly. I'm picking Laura Lee up at the airport and the photographers will be here for pictures."

Ronald nodded. He knew all about Laura Lee, for Hollywood bakes its cheesecake well, and Miss Lee's fame as a movie starlet had preceded her. Bickerstaff counted it as quite a triumph that he had secured her to model in this afternoon's Lingerie Fashion Show. "A perfect C-cup!" he'd gloated.

Ronald didn't particularly care whether or not Mr. Bickerstaff escorted Laura Lee from the airport or not this noon. He was much more interested in escorting Amy Cooper to the cafeteria. Let Mr. Bickerstaff have glamour — until his C-cup runneth over, Ronald decided. He'd take Amy any day.

Going up in the elevator he found himself wondering, for the first time, whether Amy Cooper was an A. B. or C. Then he shed the thought quickly. Such A-B-Cs were not part of the curriculum in the Old School.

THE Sixth Floor was Toyland, and Ronald quested in search of his babe. He found her behind the counter administering to the wants of a matronly woman and her small son. The child was as skinny as a lead-pencil and his head came to a most appropriate point.

"Here we are, Precious," the woman was cooing. "Now Mother will buy you a lovely painting set."

"Dowanna painting set!" muttered Precious.

"Of course you do," his mother beamed. She smiled at Amy Cooper. "He's really quite artistic, you know. You ought to see some of his work."

Abruptly, Precious leered at Amy. "Sure," he said. "How'd you like to see my etchings?"

"Why, that's no way to talk!"

Mother was abashed.

"Well, I can't show her no nudes. You tore up all my nudes," Precious pouted.

"Amy bit her lower lip. "Your son seems somewhat precocious," she ventured. "Perhaps he might be interested in a scientific toy — a chemistry set, perhaps."

"Yeah," Precious gloated. "That's more like it. Then I can make Mickey Finns for the kids on the block."

Ignoring this last remark, Amy led the woman over to a display of chemical toys. Ronald followed behind Precious.

"Now here is the very latest," the girl said. "Something brand new, imported from Germany."

"Oh boy!" Precious exclaimed, grabbing for the box, which contained a large assortment of test-tubes, retorts, and vials of colorful liquids. "Does this stuff make stink-bombs, hey?"

"I'm sure you'll find it very educational," Amy told the mother. "Your child can perform actual experiments with this."

Precious began to scramble through boxes of powder, his eyes gleaming. "Can I make an atomic bomb with this?" he queried, hopefully. "Can I blow up the world?"

"Put that down!" his mother demanded. But Precious was fondling an assortment of glass vials. "Gee!" he cried. "Acid! I can use this stuff

in my squirt-gun!" Before anyone could stop him he had uncorked a vial and was hopping around in a frenzy of anticipation. "Wow!" he said. "Looka how it fizzes!"

The liquid did indeed fizz. It began to bubble out of the container, squirting the counter, and gushed over the box of chemicals. Mother and Amy stared aghast — and it was Ronald who stepped up and took the vial away from Precious.

"Better put that down, little boy," he advised.

Precious smiled, nodded, and then kicked him viciously in the shins. Amy Cooper fluttered her hands nervously.

"Please!" she said. "Oh, just look at my counter — and the set, it's ruined! I'm afraid you'll have to purchase it, Madame. We can't hope to sell it to anyone else."

Madame sniffed. "What? Do you expect me to buy damaged merchandise? Why, I never heard of such a thing!"

"But your child is responsible—"

"Responsible? After you deliberately excited him?"

"But this is an expensive set," Amy wailed. "If you don't buy it, they'll take the price out of my salary."

"Sorry," said the woman. "It's your own fault for getting Precious so upset. He's very high-strung."

"I'd like to see him strung even higher," the girl declared. "About thirty feet off the ground, on the end of a strong rope."

With a sniff and a yank, mother and son departed. Amy put her head down on the counter. "Oh, Ronald!" she sighed. "Now what do I do? Eighteen dollars for a chemistry set—"

"I'll buy it," Ronald said.

"You? But —"

"Never mind." He smiled. "Wrap it up. I've got a nephew who'll like it. He won't care if it's a little stained."

Amy looked up and returned his smile, with interest. "That's awfully nice of you, Ronald. You're really very sweet."

RONALD would cheerfully have surrendered his eighteen dollars for the compliment alone, but after taking his money Amy wrapped and presented him with his unexpected purchase.

"Here you are," she told him. "One slightly shopworn Little Jim Dandy Home Chemical Set." She tucked a strand of fluffy hair into place at the nape of her neck. "But you haven't told me yet — what brought you up here in the first place?"

"The elevator," Ronald replied. "That is, I mean — I thought I'd come up and take you to lunch."

"Well." Amy glanced at her

watch. "It *is* time, isn't it? Come on."

With the package under one arm and Amy Cooper under the other, Ronald was happy for the first time that day.

He carried his happiness up to the cafeteria on Ten and maintained it midway through their meal.

Then two things happened to dim his delight. He asked her for a date for the evening and she demurred.

"Sorry, but I can't, Ronald," she said. "I'm going out this evening."

Ronald gulped back his disappointment. "Well, maybe we could just have supper together, then."

"If you like," the girl said, indifferently. "But I must be home by eight."

"What's so important?" Ronald asked.

"Please, I don't like it when people are inquisitive," the girl pouted. "But if you must know, tonight's the night my Sewing Club meets."

"You never told me you belonged to a Sewing Club"

"You never asked me," Amy replied.

"But is that so vital?" Ronald persisted. "I mean, couldn't you just skip it for one evening? I thought we could really go out and have a good time —"

"Sorry!" Amy Cooper shook her head. "Tonight we do fancy-work

and I can't possibly miss the lessons. But if you like, I'll let you take me to a nice expensive place for dinner."

"That'll be fine," said Ronald, and he really thought so. He reached out across the table, actually on the very verge of taking her hand, when suddenly there was another interruption.

The interruption was big, bluff and burly. It had blonde, curly hair and a boyish grin.

"Ah, here you are!" it boomed. "Looking all over for you." It boldly squeezed the hand Ronald had timidly reached for and sat down at the table.

"Relax, folks!" it said. "Stu Lacey has arrived and the situation is well in hand."

Ronald didn't agree. He wanted no part of Stu Lacey, even as a gift — although he might look well on a silver platter, roasted and with an apple stuck in his mouth.

But Amy beamed fondly on the blonde young man. "How are things up in Advertising?" she asked.

"The most," Stu answered. "Did you see today's spread on the fashion show? Featuring Laura Lee, of course. Judging from the pictures she sent, she's got quite a spread herself. Had trouble squeezing her into eight columns full." He chuckled.

Well, thought Ronald, he could afford to. He was the nephew of

the owner of the store, he was young and handsome, he had the world by the tail and Amy Cooper by the hand.

Amy was smiling up at him. "I know all about the fashion show," she said. "Ronald was just telling me."

"That's right, he's in the department, isn't he?" Stu Lacey grinned. "Is it true you're ashamed of your work?" he asked. "I understand you fellows in the brassiere department never admit what kind of jobs you have. When anybody asks, you say that you're engaged in an uplift movement."

RONALD, who had heard every possible variation on the feeble gag during the past five years, smiled stoically. But Stu was undeterred.

"Well, I must say I envy you, with Laura Lee on your hands this afternoon. What's your part in the show, exactly? Are you doing the fitting? You two may end up as bosom friends."

Ronald flushed. "Please," he said. "After all, there's a young lady present —"

But to his dismay, the young lady was snickering. "I think that's cute," she said. "Stu, you're such a character! Don't be so stuffy, Ronald."

"That's his business," Stu remarked. "Stuffing and padding.

Putting up a good front, you know." He glanced at his watch. "But say, aren't you due back upstairs? The show must be just about ready to start in a few minutes."

Ronald noted the time, gulped, and rose. "Yes," he sighed, miserably. "I'd better run along." He eyed the girl. "Coming, Amy?"

Stu waved him away. "I'll take care of her," he said. "You go ahead and handle Laura Lee. If that's the correct term, and I think it is."

Ronald blushed, nodded, and stumbled away. He clutched the chemistry set to his bosom and rode grimly to his destination.

Ladies' Lingerie was fluttering with activity. Milling and jostling, the audience pushed its way down the aisles toward the north end of the Department, where a wooden platform had been erected and backed by curtained partitions. Chairs had been set up in semicircular rows facing the stage and Ronald arrived too late to supervise the job.

Indeed, the store's organist was already installed at one corner of the stage, and electricians switched on a battery of lights. The show was virtually ready to begin.

Ronald started for the back, to deposit his package, when Mr. Bickerstaff suddenly materialized from behind the curtains. He spied

Ronald and bore down on him.

"Where have you been?" he demanded. "And what have you there?"

"Nothing," the young man gulped. "Just a chemistry set I bought."

"Chemistry sets? Here we are, up to our neck in brassieres, and you're out buying chemistry sets." He snorted. "Damned things are no good anyway — unless you can use them to invent some kind of bust-developer." He seized Ronald by the shoulder. "Take a look at the crowd," he groaned.

Ronald eyed the capacity audience. The women had filled the semicircle of seats surrounding the stage.

"Looks like a full house," he said.

"Bah!" Mr. Bickerstaff was not impressed. "Same old story. Too fat or too thin. Fat ones should go to the hammock department. Thin ones don't need our brassieres either — they can stop downstairs at the drug counter and buy a box of Band-Aids." He glowered. "But we're going to sell them merchandise this afternoon, we've got to! And there'd better not be any slip-ups."

Ronald nodded. "Is Miss Lee here?"

"Of course. She's backstage, dressing. Or undressing. A very charming young lady." Bickerstaff's jaw relaxed a trifle.

"What does she look like?"

"Lovely," said the Head Buyer.
"Perfect 36."

"Blonde or brunette?"

"I didn't notice," Bickerstaff snapped. "Who has time for such nonessentials?" He waved Ronald towards the stage. "Get up there and tell the organist we're ready to start. Then pick up that carton of handbills and pass them out to the clerks backstage. They can distribute them to the audience during intermission — we've got all the sale prices listed on the things."

The young man hesitated. "Can't I just put my chemistry set in the office, first?"

"Park it backstage," Bickerstaff commanded. "There's no time to delay. Now, move!"

RONALD moved. He spoke to the organist, and that worthy began to pedal his extremities. Then Ronald darted behind the curtains and found the three clerks and the carton of handbills. For a time he was quite busy. Too busy to notice the half-dozen models who wriggled past him, awaiting their cues; too busy to listen as Mr. Bickerstaff stepped out on the platform and delivered his opening announcements to the crowd.

The show was well under way when at last Ronald was free to

peer through the curtains and watch its progress.

To the accompaniment of music, the girls paraded across the stage and down the aisle into the audience. They promenaded one at a time, while Mr. Bickerstaff described the undergarments they wore.

Ronald, despite his familiarity with the business, found himself blushing once more at the sight of the models. He scanned the audience, grateful in the realization that it was almost entirely feminine. Here and there the spotlight reflected from a bald head, but men were few and far between. Ronald noted one wizened little character in the second row who seemed incongruously out of place — but decided that like the others, he must be somebody's captive husband. Perhaps he belonged to the fat dowager beside him; the one with the gaudy diamond bracelet worn over her gloved wrist.

Ronald watched the bracelet glitter until his eyes were dazzled by other things, such as the gleam of platinum in a girl's hair.

She stepped out on the platform and a low murmur arose from the crowd. They had recognized Laura Lee.

The starlet made her appearance — and an almost complete appearance it was — in a black negligee, covered with sequins that matched her hair. She turned her

head and Ronald caught a glimpse of an oval face and slanting eyes. Then she advanced to the center of the platform and began her promenade.

All eyes centered on the girl, and Mr. Bickerstaff began to do a bit of quiet gloating. As she moved down the aisle, Ronald found himself admiring the metronomic precision with which Laura Lee undulated her trim torso — at least he told himself it was the precision he admired, rather than the torso itself. Somewhat abashed at the notion, he glanced hastily away.

And it was then that he caught the glitter of the diamond bracelet once more. The fat dowager was leaning forward, and the bracelet seemed to be slipping off her wrist.

Slipping? Not exactly. The seedy little man beside her was quietly unclasping it and preparing to drop it into his pocket.

Ronald parted the curtains and bounded across the stage. Even as the little man removed the bracelet, Ronald was halfway to his side, and his sudden shout stopped the starlet's promenade performance.

The fat woman turned to stare. The small thief looked up, startled, just as Laura Lee brushed her way past down the aisle. Swiftly the small man rose, stumbled forward.

Ronald caught him by the collar and plumped him back down again in his seat.

Laura Lee stood uncertainly as Mr. Bickerstaff bore down on the scene in full cry. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

Ronald shrugged. "Sorry to interrupt," he answered. "But I saw this lady being robbed of her diamond bracelet."

The fat dowager clutched her wrist with sudden dismay, to say nothing of pudgy fingers. "It's gone!" she gasped.

"Of course it is," Ronald nodded. "And I think it's in this man's pocket."

The little wizened gentleman looked up and wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Ain't nothin' in my pocket," he announced. "Nothin' but fuzz."

"Let me see."

Mr. Bickerstaff leaned over and groped in the right hand suitcoat pocket with his fingers. Then he repeated the performance on the left pocket.

"He's right," Bickerstaff announced. "Nothing in there but fuzz."

"Try his trousers," Ronald urged.

The little man wrinkled his nose again. "No use," he said. "Same kinda fuzz down there, too."

"But my bracelet *is* gone!" wailed the woman.

"And I saw him take it," Ronald insisted.

The little man scowled. "You tryin to incinerate I'm a cannon?" he demanded. "I'll sue the store!"

His voice was penetrating, and the crowd didn't miss a word.

Mr. Bickerstaff began to redden behind the ears, as if a beautiful sunset was disappearing behind his bald head.

"You'll sue?" shrilled the dowager. "My bracelet's gone. *I'll* sue!"

"Let's both sue, lady," the little man suggested. "I gotta good shy-ster — he'll take this jernt for every penny it's got."

Bickerstaff glanced at both of his irate customers, then turned to Ronald. "You!" he muttered. "*You* started this! I'll give you just thirty seconds to produce that bracelet or else —"

Ronald waved his arms. "But I tell you, I saw it happen. He did take it, and then he got up and tried to run away, and he bumped into Miss Lee, and —"

A gleam of comprehension came into his eyes as he turned and advanced to the edge of the platform where the statuesque platinum blonde still poised en *negligée*.

"Now I understand," he said. "That's what happened. He planted the bracelet on her."

"Twenty seconds!" Bickerstaff hissed.

"Must be in the sleeve." Ronald began to paw the starlet's shoulder.

"Oops — forgot — this doesn't have sleeves," he said. "Then there's only one place he could have put it. Down here —"

Laura Lee jumped a foot out of her professional aplomb. "Hey," she demanded. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Just looking for a bracelet," Ronald explained, smiling placatingly at her and Mr. Bickerstaff.

"I don't happen to wear any down there," the starlet told him. "As you can all too plainly see. Now stop that—"

"Ten seconds!" Bickerstaff said.

Ronald struggled desperately.

"Please, Miss Lee," he begged. "Hold still. I'm not doing what you think I'm doing."

"Even if you were, I wouldn't hold still," she retorted. "Besides, your hands are cold."

"It's got to be around here someplace," Ronald wheezed, reddening. "Oops — pardon my elbow —"

Laura Lee jerked away. The abrupt gesture catapulted Ronald to the floor, and there was a loud snap. At first he thought the girl's patience had given way, but a roar from the crowd told him otherwise. It was her negligee. Floating down, it covered his face just in time to hide the blush. Amidst the din, Laura Lee's brassiered bosom and pantied posterior scooted across the stage to the curtains.

Over the howling of the mob Bickerstaff had no trouble in making himself heard. "You're through!" he shouted "Get out of here this minute!"

Somehow Ronald managed to stumble backstage, pick up his chemical set, and depart.

There was no question about seeing Amy Cooper for dinner. There was only the need to get home, fast.

After what had happened today, he had no future with Amy. He had no future with Ladies' Lingerie, either. In fact, Ronald meditated bitterly, he had no future at all.

ARRIVING at the apartment, he flung himself into a chair and the depths of the most profound depression he had ever known.

This, he decided, was the end. Might as well finish the job.

"I'll kill myself, that's what I'll do," he muttered. Rising, he groped his way into the darkness of the kitchen. "Cut my throat," he murmured. He opened the table drawer and fumbled for a knife. "Ouch!" Ronald yelled, as his finger grazed the edge of a piece of cutlery. He retreated to the parlor, gazing at his bleeding thumb. "Can't use a knife," he decided. "Too sharp. I'm liable to hurt myself."

Ronald was not exactly in a

logical frame of mind, but it would be a mistake to judge him harshly. Five years in Ladies' Lingerie does things to a man.

Abruptly he contemplated the chemistry set.

"Just the thing," he told himself. "Poison. There should be a lot of poisonous chemicals in there."

He unwrapped the Little Jim Dandy Kit, took off the cover, and considered the imposing array of vials and powders. A large bottle of colorless liquid attracted his eye.

"Might as well try it," he sighed. He raced out to the kitchen and returned with a glass. He was too well-trained to think of drinking out of the bottle.

Pouring three ounces of the liquid, Ronald closed his eyes and drew the glass to his lips. "Well," he whispered. "Here goes nothing."

The stuff smelled strong. He had to force himself to swallow, and then his throat began to burn. Somewhere in Ronald's stomach it seemed as though a Boy Scout had rubbed two sticks together and achieved spectacular results.

"Oooh!" Ronald groaned. "I'm dying! Wonder what it was — cyanide?"

Through tear-dimmed eyes he read the label. "Pure Grain Alcohol—180 Proof."

Ronald had just taken his first drink.

Surprisingly, the bonfire in his stomach seemed to subside, and there was now only a warm glow, that rose throughout his body and heated his face and forehead pleasantly.

Hardly realizing what he was doing, Ronald poured again. Once more he drank, and this time an entire troop of Boy Scouts won their merit badges in his esophagus.

But he didn't die. And now, somewhat woozily—for six full ounces of Grain Alcohol can kindle quite a conflagration—Ronald grasped vials and bottles at random and shook a small portion of their contents into the glass. An ounce of red, an ounce of green, an ounce of blue; jigger of that yellow liquid, a pinch of whitish powder. The resultant cocktail began to simmer and fizzle, as the various components seethed and blended into a purple liquid.

He stared at the glass, and as the warmth of the alcohol bathed his body, he hesitated for a moment. Maybe he was making a mistake, after all. But no — his girl was gone, his job was gone, and he had nothing to live for. This was the best way.

Closing his eyes, he drained the glass at a gulp.

Boy Scouts and bonfire vanished from his stomach, hurled into nothingness by the force of an atomic

explosion. A Bikini Test reached its successful conclusion somewhere in the neighborhood of Ronald's liver.

With a gasp, the young man tottered and fell up.

He landed with a dull thud, on the ceiling.

CHAPTER II

IT was several moments before he opened his eyes. Dazed, he stared down at the room below. He blinked, closed his eyes again, then parted his lids once more.

The sight remained, unchanged. Ronald was lying on the ceiling and staring down at the parlor.

"I'm dead!" he whispered. "If I could get through I'd float right up to heaven. But—where's my body?"

He searched the floor, seeking to catch sight of his corpse. But there was none to be seen. Glancing down, he was aware of his material presence, apparently quite intact, lying here on the ceiling.

"That's impossible!" he told himself. "How can I be lying up here?"

Now that he noticed it, he wasn't exactly recumbent. He was floating rather; floating ever so gently at the top of the room. He turned over gingerly, banging his head on the chandelier.

The sharp stab of pain convinced

him.

"I'm alive," he decided. "But what keeps me from falling? I should be on the floor."

There was a sudden whoosh and Ronald thumped down on the carpet. Fortunately, he hadn't had time to tense his muscles and he made a perfect three-point landing without undue damage to his body. His mind, however, was far from intact.

"This can't be," he muttered, dazedly. "Those chemicals are giving me hallucinations. Bumping my head on the chandelier—I must have imagined it."

He tried to stand up. More accurately, he visualized himself as standing, and found that he was floating to his feet. It was a giddy feeling, and he didn't exactly enjoy it. He willed himself to stand erect, and that only made him feel worse. Truth to tell, Ronald was more than a little drunk. The alcohol—plus the haphazard combination concocted from the chemistry set—had done its work only too well.

He wavered from side to side, then glided over to a mirror on the wall. Conscious of his slight stature, he rose on tiptoe to peer at himself. Hardly aware of his actions, he lifted about a foot in the air and hung there, staring.

"True," he mumbled. "There I am. So I must be alive. And I

can float." Dizzy, he closed his eyes and lay down on the air. Now the sensation was rather pleasant. He opened his eyes again and waved his arms, at the same time willing himself to move towards the sofa.

"Foolish," he said. "Don't need the sofa. Perfectly comfortable right here."

And he was. As fright left him, bewilderment gradually faded away. He began to move around the room, accustoming himself to this new method of locomotion. There were, he discovered, two ways of controlling his floating ability. He could use his arms and legs for steering and thus swim through the air; that was one method. The other, and more startling, was simply to *will* himself to a certain height at a certain distance. Both systems seemed equally effective.

"Lightheaded," he murmured.

That's how I feel. Must be awfully drunk. Everything going around and around." No sooner had he expressed the thought than he caught sight of himself in the mirror, revolving in midair like a human top.

"If Amy could only see me now," he told himself.

Well, why not? Ronald arrested his movement and floated over to the clock. It wasn't much past seven. He could go over and visit Amy until it was time for her to

leave for the Sewing Circle.

Come to think of it, that wasn't such a bad idea. After all, he had to tell somebody about this seeming miracle. Inebriated though he was, Ronald realized that his peculiar condition warranted investigation and explanation; yet he could hardly venture to call upon a stranger. Amy would be the logical person to see.

But when he willed himself down once more and attempted to head for the door, he found himself weaving dangerously. "No use," he sighed. "Too much to drink. Never make those stairs."

But then, he remembered, he didn't have to. Why bother with stairs?

RONALD put on his hat and coat. The night was chilly and he didn't want to run any risks.

After thus taking all suitable precautions for his health and safety, he turned and jumped out of the fourth-storey window.

For a moment he felt panic as he fell. Then he righted his body by flailing his arms and with effortless inclination, propelled himself down the alleyway at a height of about twenty feet. Taking a deep breath, he shot forward across the street and into the continuation of the alley in the next block.

Luckily, traffic was light, and

the night was moonless. His airy progress was unnoted. His body whizzed past the back windows of countless apartments, but nobody looked out to observe him. The city-dwellers were following their usual nocturnal patterns this evening; watching television, quarreling, or drinking beer. Some were watching television *and* quarreling at the same time. Some were watching television *and* drinking beer. A few of the more impoverished ones were just quarreling and drinking beer while watching the neighbors' television. It was a typical night in an urban community.

Typical, that is, for everyone except Ronald Weems. He was flying, and he loved it.

The sudden exhilaration surprised him. Part of it was due to his intoxicated condition, of course, but over and above that he felt the surge of unexpected release. He sensed power and a new awareness that came of finding himself free.

He had been short. Now he was tall.

He had been confined to Ladies' Lingerie for five years. Now his domain was limitless.

He had wanted to do away with himself. Now—

"I'm really living," he whispered, as the sharp wind cut his cheeks, as the night air wrapped

around him like a black blanket. He waved his arms gaily, willed himself forward at greater speed.

What would that old fool Bickerstaff say if he could see *this*? For that matter, what would anyone say? For the first time, the full possibilities of his newfound talent revealed themselves. Why, he could become rich and famous! Maybe he could go before the CAB and get himself a commercial license — pick off a fat government contract as a chartered carrier of airmail.

But Amy would advise him, she'd know what he ought to do. Ronald chuckled as he flew. He passed the city hall with its clock-tower. Almost eight. If he hurried, he'd just manage to catch her before she went out. He could scarcely wait to see the look on her face.

Amy's apartment building loomed ahead. Ronald swooped down along the alley and circled the side of the structure until he reached her third-storey living-room window. The shades were up, the light was on. He'd just make a landing out in front and ring her doorbell. On the other hand —

On the other hand, why bother? Ronald chuckled again. He'd fly right up to the window itself and surprise her.

He did.

But, unfortunately for Ronald, Amy surprised him.

For as Ronald gazed through the

glass, at precisely five minutes past eight, the young lady was just opening her front door. At first he thought he was too late — that Amy was departing for her Sewing Circle date.

Then he changed his mind, for Stu Lacey walked into her living-room.

A great deal happened in the next five minutes, but none of it seemed to have anything to do with what usually goes on in a Sewing Circle. There was, admittedly, quite a bit of fancy work, although the only thing knitted was Ronald's brow.

Stu Lacey and Amy had made themselves extremely at home on the sofa, and there was no telling what might have happened next if Amy hadn't peered over her shoulder.

She let out a subdued shriek.

"What's the matter, baby?" Stu demanded. "Did I pinch you too hard?"

"No, but you'd better," the girl declared. "I could swear I just saw a face looking through the window."

Stu turned and shook his head. "Nothing there," he said. "Besides, it's impossible. There's no porch or fire-escape, and we're three flights up. Must be your imagination."

Amy nodded and pursed her lips

invitingly. Stu bent towards them in the age-old manner of romance, to say nothing of a kid trying to get a drink from a bubbler. Then it was his turn to freeze at attention.

"You're right!" he declared. "There *is* something out there. I just saw it myself."

He rose and headed for the window. Amy followed.

"Gone now," he muttered. "But I'm sure I did see a face." He opened the window and peered down at the sheer drop to the street below.

"Nothing now, though," he assured the girl. "Maybe we're both upset. How about a drink?"

Amy nodded. Leaving the window open, they repaired to the hall cabinet and the girl procured a bottle.

"Never mind the soda," Stu said. "I want mine straight. That face gave me a nasty start."

"You got a nasty start the day you were born," a voice declared, hallowly.

"What did you say?" Stu Lacey demanded.

"I didn't say anything" Amy answered, returning from the kitchen with glasses.

"Could have sworn I heard somebody talking," her companion muttered. "Oh, well. Let me pour—"

"Eek!" eeked the girl. "There it is again!" She pointed at the window. Stu dashed towards it but

once more he peered out upon darkness.

"We're both imagining things," he decided.

Amy shook her head. "Not me! This time I'm positive I saw a face."

"What did it look like?"

"All staring and horrible. It must be a Peeping Tom."

"Peeping Tomcat, more likely," Stu said. "See for yourself, there's no one here."

Satisfied, the girl nodded and poured a drink. Stu closed the window.

"Better?" he asked. "Come on, baby, relax."

He took her into his arms and demonstrated in a very active way just what he meant by relaxation. Once more, the girl started.

"Stu," she whispered. "I thought you closed the window?"

"I did."

"Well, don't look now, but it's open again."

The window was indeed open. A cold blast blew up Stu Lacey's neck.

"This joint is haunted," he mumbled, pouring himself another drink.

"I *told* you!" Amy shivered, and not entirely from cold. She grabbed the bottle and reduced its contents. "You should have seen that face—all grinning and horrid, just hanging there and goggling at me."

"Was not."

"Was not what?"

"Was not giggling."

"I didn't say you were, Stu," the girl told him.

"I never said you did." He blinked. "That wasn't my voice." It was his turn to reach for the bottle. "I'm going to close that window," he promised. "But not until I have another drink."

"Good idea," the voice boomed from behind them. "Let's all have one."

RONALD WEEMS stood lurching in one corner of the room. His face was reddened equally by exposure to wind and to 180 proof alcohol, but he grinned amiably.

"Quite a Sewing Club you have here, Amy," he remarked. "For a small membership you certainly get a lot accomplished."

Amy Cooper flushed. "Why—why, I was just about to leave, Ronald," she said. "Stu is driving me over. He's going to carry my yarn."

"I don't see any yarn," Ronald answered. "Except maybe the one you were handing me." He took the bottle from Stu Lacey's nerveless fingers and downed a healthy swig.

Stu stared at him intently. "How did you sneak in here?" he demanded. "The door's locked."

"Window's open," Ronald reminded him.

"Now don't tell me you crawled up the bare bricks for three storeys—that's impossible."

"Of course it is," Ronald agreed, mildly. "Matter of fact, I flew."

"Flew?"

"Floated, if you prefer. Or rather, if I prefer. I can float or fly, whichever I choose."

"You're drunk!" Stu Lacey accused.

"Right." Ronald wobbled, then recovered his balance. "That makes it even more fun. Did you ever try floating when you're drunk? Very strange sensation."

Amy Cooper put her hand on his arm. "No wonder you didn't take me to dinner," she said. "You were out getting high instead."

"Sure." Ronald tilted the bottle again. "Easy for me to get high. Want to see?"

Holding the bottle, he performed an *entrechat* that would have done credit to Nijinsky and ended up with his head against the ceiling.

Stu Lacey and the girl found themselves staring open-mouthed, but neither of them applauded.

"Think of it," Ronald called down to them. "Two hours ago I was finished. The brassiere sale turned out to be a bust. I thought I was down for the count. And now I'm a rising young man."

He kicked his legs again. "Not used to liquor," he apologized.

"Pardon me. Maybe I'd better lay down and take a little nap." And he stretched out on the ceiling, closing his eyes.

Amy Cooper clutched her companion. "Do something," she whispered. "This is serious."

"You're right," Stu agreed. "He has the bottle up there."

"I'm going to call the police," Amy decided. "I don't want a human fly hanging around my apartment."

Ronald opened his eyes. "Not a human fly," he muttered. "Not a Peeping Tom, either. Just flitting around, thought I'd drop in and pay you a little flying visit. That any reason to call the police?"

Stu Lacey was holding his head in his hands. "I don't believe it," he moaned. "Tell me I'm drunk. Tell me I'm seeing things."

"But we're both seeing it," Amy reminded him. "And hearing it, too."

"I'm not an it," Ronald said. "Just a poor misguided square who's never been around. So all right, I've learned my lesson. Don't bother about me, Amy. Go on with your Sewing Circle or whatever you call it. I'll just catch forty winks up here, out of your way."

Stu pulled himself together with an effort. "Now see here," he began. "You can't get away with this—"

"Oh, stick to your knitting!"

Ronald peered down at Amy Cooper. "Maybe it's a good thing I found out about you the way I did," he murmured. "Maybe that's why I was given the power."

The girl wasn't following his remarks. She was heading for the phone. "Close the window, Stu," she called. "Don't let him get away! I'm calling the police right now. He's crazy."

SHOCKED into sudden sobriety, Ronald swooped after her. "But Amy, you don't understand—I came to you for help, I want to explain what happened—"

Amy Cooper grabbed the phone and yanked the cord into the bedroom, slamming the door. "Keep away from me," she screamed. "Stu, close that window and grab him!"

Stu did his best. As Ronald soared overhead, the blonde young man rushed for the window.

"All right, if that's the way you want to play," Ronald muttered. "Here, have a drink on me."

He dropped the bottle. The bottle, landing squarely on Stu Lacey's head, dropped him.

And Ronald dropped out of the open window.

For a moment he hung there, kicking empty air. He was badly shaken. It was true that he'd come to Amy Cooper seeking aid. Instead

of consolation he'd found consternation. Now he had literally nowhere to turn.

What was worse, from a distance came the faint wail of sirens. The sound grew louder.

"She did it!" he told himself. "She called the cops!"

Quickly, he swooped along the alley. He had almost reached the end when he saw the flash of a squadcar's searchlight beam. Somersaulting in midair, he reversed his path and soared back to the other end.

Then he realized that his method of locomotion was, to say the least, conspicuous. He willed himself to descend and landed with a thump that rocked his heels, on the alley pavement close to the far exit.

The searchlight stabbed against the apartment building walls behind him, and he could hear the sound of running feet. Suddenly a voice rang out. "There he is! Stop—stop or I'll shoot!"

Alarmed, Ronald crouched beside a garbage-can. Peering out, he discovered that the remarks were not addressed to him, but to a diminutive figure that now floundered up the alley towards him. Behind came three minions of the law, their long arms extended, hands brandishing revolvers.

A shot echoed through the alley, then another. The running figure

weaved and ducked, but the searchlight glared. The pursuers raised their weapons again.

This time the light shone directly down the alley, outlining their moving target. This time they would not miss.

Ronald made his decision. He didn't know who was running, or why, but he did know that he disliked policemen; especially policemen with guns. They were on the side of the Bickerstaffs and the Stulaceys—and as such, automatically his enemies. Besides, he couldn't let a man be shot down in cold blood. Maybe that's why he had the power, too.

At any rate, he'd find out. And now.

With a welling of will that propelled him forward like a cannonball, Ronald whizzed along the alley, scooped up the running figure in his arms, and soared a hundred feet above the highest rooftop.

The searchlight swept crazily, seeking him in the sky, and from far below came the whine of bullets and the wail of bewildered men.

But Ronald flew fast and free into the night, cradling the diminutive fugitive.

A voice chirped feebly in his ear. "Solid, Dad!" it said. "Dig that crazy jet propulsion!"

Ronald gazed down.

Smiling up at him tenderly was

the little pickpocket from the department store.

CHAPTER III

“HOW did you get here?” he gasped.

“Search me, buddy. Here I am, running down the alley and minding my own business, and you come along and make with the break. I was just gonna ask how you did it.” The little man scowled in perplexity. “You don’t happen to be a character name of Superman, huh?”

Ronald shook his head and shifted the little man’s weight to his left arm.

“My name’s Ronald Weems,” he said.

“Pleaseda meetcha, I’m sure. Hey, wait a minute!” The shrill voice rose. “You’re the party what hollered copper on me this afternoon, ain’cha? In the department store, where I was negotiatin’ for that diamond bracelet!”

Ronald nodded ruefully.

“So what am I hanging around you for? Lemme go!” the little man wailed.

“I wouldn’t make such a request if I were you,” Ronald declared, gazing down at the city far below. His companion followed his gaze and shuddered.

“Yeah. Guess you’re right at that. But look, Dad, where you

figger on taking me?”

Ronald shrugged as best he could, under the circumstances. “I haven’t the faintest idea,” he declared, dodging the City Hall tower. “Want me to drop you somewhere?”

“You better not!” the man gasped.

Ronald slowed down. “Then perhaps you might as well introduce yourself and tell me what you happened to be doing in that alleyway.”

“My name’s Guilty Miltie, and I was just dodging cops is all.”

“But why were you dodging them?” Ronald persisted.

“So they wouldn’t catch me, of course,” Guilty Miltie answered. “Jeez, how dumb can you get.”

“Never mind that, now. I want the truth. What were you up to?”

“I was up to the second storey, if you must know,” Miltie admitted. “I’m a cannon, see?”

“Frankly, I don’t. You’re mighty small to be a weapon of any sort.”

“All the better,” Miltie declared. “Us short ones have a advantage. We’re closer to the pocket. We can snitch and switch.”

“You mean you’re a pickpocket, eh?”

“I was, until this afternoon. You reformed me.”

Ronald smiled. “You mean, because I foiled you in your attempt to steal that bracelet?”

The little cannon nodded. "That's it. I figgered my techneek was shot, I'd better give it up and reform. So that's why I was in the alley tonight. I decided to go in for burglary, instead."

"Oh, great!" Ronald groaned.

"Not so great. Somebody got the cops, and I had to drop from the second-storey window and slam for a lam. Lucky you come along or I'd be real cool in the cooler." He winked at Ronald. "Got to thank you for that, pal. But hey, how'd you manage this flying trick? You got a motor in your pants, or something?"

The young man shook his head. "No. It's just a little talent I seem to have developed."

"Suits me fine," Miltie declared.

"Well, it doesn't seem to suit anyone else. I went to tell my girlfriend about it, and she's the one who called the police. They saw me take off with you, so I expect everybody's looking for me by this time. Which reminds me—what am I going to do? I can't take you home with me. They'll stake out there."

"Then how about coming along with me?" Miltie asked. "I think a guy with your gimmick can go a long ways."

"Where, for instance?"

Guilty Miltie pointed towards the left. "Across the river," he said. "Maybe I'm only a little can-

non, but I know some real torpedos. The guy we want to see is Ace Diamond."

Ronald hesitated. "Is Mr. Diamond a crook?" he inquired.

"Nah, don't worry. He's just a respectable big-time gambler, is all."

"Well, in that case—" Ronald sighed. "Oh, what have I got to lose? Show me where to go."

GUILTY Miltie showed him. Five minutes later they spiraled down beside what appeared to be a deserted warehouse on the waterfront across the river.

"Good to get my feet on terror firmer," Miltie declared. "That was some ride. Come on, here we are. Just you let me do the explaining, see?"

He led Ronald up to a doorway and knocked discreetly three times. Nothing happened.

"I don't understand it," the little pickpocket muttered. "That's always suppose to be the signal, ain't it? Knocking three times? Oh, well."

He began to knock less discreetly with both hands and then with his feet. That did it. In a moment the panelled top of the door slid open and a face stared out. It was a big fat face that hadn't seen a razor for some time.

"So?" it muttered.

"So let us in," Guilty Miltie ans-

wered.

"Who are you?"

"Don't you recognize me? I'm a friend of Ace Diamond's."

The face wagged dolefully. "Huh," it said. "If you was a friend of Ace Diamond's, you'd know he ain't got no friends."

"But I got to see him — I'm in trouble."

"You'll be in more," the face promised, "unless you scram outta here." The panel slammed shut.

"This is embarrassing," Miltie said. "Can't figger why he's so cagey. Must be a big game going on tonight." Suddenly his eyes narrowed. "Hey, we can still get in. I know a way."

"How?"

The little man pointed overhead. "Window," he said. "Come on."

"But won't Mr. Diamond be angry if somebody breaks in on him so — abruptly?"

"Nah. He'll love it!" Miltie grabbed Ronald by the shoulders. "Come on," he urged. "Going up!"

And up they went, to the second floor, hovering around the side of the building until Ronald's small passenger discovered an unlocked window. The room beyond was dark and deserted. In they climbed, tumbling to the floor. Miltie headed for the door, which led down a passageway to a large, well-lighted room.

Ronald stood there, getting his

first glimpse of a gambling den.

The space around the half-dozen green tables was well occupied by eager patrons. Two roulette wheels spun, a chuck-a-luck cage rattled, dice thumped. The operators behind the tables wore evening clothes, and they weren't the only ones — many of the customers were similarly attired, although several seemed in the process of losing their boiled shirts.

Down at the far end of the room the largest crowd was gathered around a big dice-table, behind which sat a corpulent gentleman with a dazzling smile. Ronald didn't need an introduction once he saw the smile. The man had diamonds set in his teeth.

"That's your friend, isn't it?" he whispered.

Miltie nodded, "Yeah. And I can see he's busy, all right."

Ace Diamond was indeed quite busy. At the moment he was engaged in raking in a large bundle of greenbacks.

"He seems to be very lucky tonight," Ronald observed.

"Sure." Miltie chuckled. "He's lucky nobody's examined his dice."

"You mean Mr. Diamond cheats?"

Miltie shivered. "Don't say things like that around here," he said. "He's kind of sensitive. Also, his boys are." A nod indicated half a dozen solitary figures lounging at

intervals along the far wall.

"I'm not so sure I want to meet your Mr. Diamond after all," Ronald said.

"Aw, come on —" Miltie started forward, then stopped.

"What's the matter?"

"That dame," he wheezed. "The one with the dice now—"

Ronald stared, recognized the platinum hair. "Laura Lee, isn't it?"

"It is. And if she recognizes me, I'm cooked!"

"Hey, where are you going?"

But the little pickpocket had already gone, leaving no forwarding address. He darted through the crowd, pausing only to snatch two wallets, and plunged down the front stairs.

RONALD turned to follow, then hesitated. Laura Lee was up here. After he'd been fired this afternoon she must have discovered the missing bracelet on her person. Perhaps she could vindicate him if he asked her. It was worth a try. He could at least speak to her.

Accordingly he moved down the aisle towards the big table. As he did so he wobbled a bit. "Liquor," he reminded himself. Although the giddy feeling didn't seem to be connected with intoxication. Rather it was as though the chemicals he had absorbed were bubbling and seething in his system. A wave of

heat scorched through his skull and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again he had the sensation of being able to see more clearly than before.

And what he saw was very simple. Laura Lee, holding the dice, was tossing the contents of her purse onto the green table. Ace Diamond grinned at her, counted the bills, matched them from his pile.

The starlet did not return his smile. "This had better be it," she declared. "I still don't see how you managed to clean me in fifteen minutes."

"Luck," Ace Diamond grunted. "Come on, let 'em roll!"

The platinum blonde picked up the dice and held them for a moment. Beneath the mask of mascara, the patina of powder, Ronald caught the momentary glimpse of a nervous tic. The girl was frightened, he decided. He knew that look only too well — he'd worn it himself, many times.

Ronald regarded the dice in her hand. He hoped she'd win now. Let's see, what did it take? A seven, or an eleven. Of course, that's what she was muttering. "Come on, seven!"

"Come on, seven," Ronald repeated, under his breath.

The dice bounced down on the table, hit the backboard, came to rest. A five and a two.

"Ah!" sighed the girl.

"Well, whaddya know!" Ace Diamond shrugged and glanced at the spectators, then at Laura Lee. "Your dice, your bet."

She pushed the entire stack of bills forward. "I feel as if my luck has changed," she said.

Again she threw the dice. Ronald remembered that four and three also make seven. Curiously enough, these were the numbers that came up.

So did Ace Diamond's eyebrows.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, thus demonstrating his ability to predict a sure thing. "Do you mind if I give you a new pair of dice, lady?"

Laura Lee eyed him suspiciously. "I rather like these," she pouted.

Ronald edged over to her and nudged her. A wild surmise gleamed in his eyes. "Go ahead," he whispered. "Let him switch."

The starlet glanced at him in surprise, then curiously.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" she asked.

"We met informally," Ronald muttered. "But I wish you'd take my advice. I think you've got a winning streak."

The platinum curls tossed. "All right." She faced the fat gambler. "Bring out the ivories."

Ace Diamond nudged a sallow gentleman at his left, who immediately produced a fresh pair of

dice. He rolled them out on the table to the girl, and as she scooped them up Ronald noted that they had landed to show one and one — snake-eyes. This was not in itself unusual, because these dice happened to be covered with nothing but single dots on every side.

Laura Lee held them without inspecting them. She turned to Ronald and smiled. "Well, Mister, seeing as you're advising me, what do I bet?"

Again Ronald felt a strange surge, compounded of equal parts of power, confidence, and Grain Alcohol. "Shoot the works," he said.

The girl pushed her imposing stack of folding money forward. Ace Diamond smiled. His left-hand man counted the bills carefully, and Diamond matched them. It took everything he had in front of him, plus a sizable addition from his trousers pocket.

A reverent hush fell over the assemblage. The worshippers of Dame Fortune had deserted the minor altars and now crowded around this table, awaiting the major sacrifice to come.

Ace Diamond stuck a gold toothpick between his glittering fillings.

"Roll 'em, lady," he urged.

And Laura Lee rolled 'em.

Six and one make seven, Ronald thought.

The dice bounced. A one came up. And then, another one.

Six, Ronald thought. *That should be a six.*

"Snake eyes!" Ace Diamond shouted. "I collect."

He reached for the money, then his hands hesitated. Ronald broke the silence. "Perhaps you need glasses," he said. "That's a one and a six."

"Glasses?" Diamond scowled. "Have I gone crazy, or did that one turn into a six just now?"

"You're right, boss," muttered the left-hand man. "I seen it myself."

"But that's impossible!" Diamond yelled, as Laura Lee scooped her winning into her handbag. "It can't be a six. Somebody cheated — I know, on account of there's nothing on them dice but ones."

"Glasses," Ronald said. "Nice, strong glasses. I know the name of a reliable optometrist —"

Ace Diamond stood up slowly and pushed his jaw halfway across the table. "You know a lot of things, don't you, buddy?" he said. "Such as what the lady should bet, what comes up on the table. Very sharp. But I am not interested in your optometrist."

"Sorry," Ronald said.

"I am hoping you know the name of a good undertaker," Ace Diamond continued. "Because unless the lady here gives back that

dough, you are gonna need one, fast. Grab her, Thorstein."

The sallow man named Thorstein put his hand on Laura Lee's shoulder. Nobody made a move to stop him, because he put his other hand on the table — and there was a pistol in it.

Ronald gulped air, and at the same time absorbed confidence and sudden decision. He whirled the girl around and slipped an arm under hers.

"Don't be scared," he said. "No matter what happens. Just hang on tight. Or tightly. No time for grammatical niceties."

And indeed, there wasn't. Before the astonished starlet could frame a protest, her protesting frame was lifted off the ground and Ronald soared over the table.

Ace Diamond stared up, jaws gaping to reveal every one of the 18½ carats in his mouth.

The crowd gasped and scattered, as well they might, because Thorstein was waving his pistol.

"Oooohh!" gasped the girl. "He'll shoot!"

Ronald lowered his head and crashed forward, brushing against the hanging light-fixture. The globes shattered and the room was plunged into darkness. A shot made a scarlet exclamation point to the crash of the chandelier.

There were screams and curses, and then guns blazed from the far

wall as the other attendants got in to the act.

"Wh-what are you doing?" quavered the girl, clinging to Ronald's neck.

"Looking for the door I came in by," he told her. "I think I know where it is, now. Keep your head down — here we go!"

And there they went, through the dark doorway and into the office beyond. The window was still conveniently open.

Kicking the door shut as he sailed past it, Ronald swirled for the window.

"Where are you going now?" breathed Laura Lee.

"Out, of course. Where else?"

"What a way to die!" Shuddering, she closed her eyes as Ronald jumped out the second-storey window, holding her in his arms.

He felt the now familiar falling sensation and almost automatically kicked his heels. Nothing happened. He was still falling — although far from still.

It wasn't working!

Now it was Ronald's turn to close his eyes. They were still closed when the two fugitives landed; a double landing in more ways than one. The first stop was momentary, on the canvas roof of a convertible that was speeding down the alleyway. When the roof collapsed, they collapsed, in the back seat of the car.

No bones were broken. As the car gained speed, screaming out of the alley on two wheels, they regarded each other in shocked surprise.

Then, almost simultaneously, they peered at the driver. He turned and leered at them cordially.

"Where to, folks?" said Guilty Miltie.

"Hanover Hotel," breathed Laura Lee, and promptly fainted.

CHAPTER IV

"SHE'LL be all right," Miltie said, for the fifth time, as Ronald fanned the platinum blonde with a wad of greenbacks from her handbag. "What I wanna know is, what happened?"

Briefly, Ronald described his experiences since the pickpocket's departure. He omitted mention of the changing dice-numerals, however; that little detail still puzzled him. Even more baffling was the sudden loss of his strange powers.

"But what I want to know is," he concluded, "where did you get this car?"

"I come downstairs, see?" Miltie explained patiently. "And I decided to take a little walk for myself. Until in the parking lot back there I noticed this here car. So I figured walking is nice but riding is nicer."

"In other words, you stole the

car."

"I borried it," the little man snapped. "I was gonna bring it back, honest I was. Maybe take a little drive out to California or someplace first. I figger it's a patriotic duty like, to see America first."

Ronald shook his head. He was at a loss for words. He was at a loss for thoughts, too. So much had happened to him today — so much that was baffling, inexplicable, and unpredictable. He could no longer apply his sense of values to a changed and apparently still-changing world. As late as this afternoon he'd have maintained a firm opinion that borrowing cars for trips to California was wrong. But then again, as late as this afternoon he'd have held an equally firm opinion about the impossibility of floating, flying, or changing the spots on dice.

No! it was too much for Ronald. His muscles ached from unaccustomed exertion, his head ached from unaccustomed contact with ceilings, chandeliers and convertible canvas. Besides, the glow of the alcohol was wearing off.

Ronald was quite weary when the car pulled up before the entrance of the Hanover Hotel. He eyed the somnolent starlet. "Guess we'll have to carry her in," he said.

Guilty Miltie shook his head. "Not me, buddy," he said. "She

wakes up and what does she do? Recognizes me from this afternoon and hollers copper, that's what. No, you gotta carry her alone. Besides, you can always fly up."

"That's just it," Ronald murmured. "I can't fly. Something's wrong."

"Your opinion," retorted Miltie. "I figgered something was wrong when you could." He gunned the motor. "Anyways, from now on, you're on your own."

"My own what?" Ronald asked. But Miltie didn't answer. The convertible drove off, leaving the young man standing on the sidewalk with the girl in his arms.

"Wake up!" he said, shaking her violently. "You're home!" Slowly, Laura Lee opened her eyes. Then she shuddered.

"Now I remember you! You're the one who went after me this afternoon."

"I wasn't after you," Ronald protested. "I was just after that diamond bracelet."

"Not very flattering; are you?" Laura Lee sniffed. "Honestly, that's all you men think of is money."

"I wasn't thinking of money," he told her. "If I was, I could have stolen your purse just now while you were unconscious."

"That's right." She smiled at him, and Ronald was surprised at the warmth in her eyes. "You did

save me, didn't you? But I can't quite see how — diving out of the window that way —”

“It's a long story,” Ronald said. “Hard to explain.”

“Maybe a drink would help,” the girl suggested. “I have ever so much liquor up in my suite.”

“Lead the way,” Ronald answered. His reply surprised him; it was not like Ronald Weems to pay midnight visits to hotel suites in search of liquor. It was not like Ronald Weems to look fondly on young women who paraded around publicly in their undies; who gambled and drank and exhibited none of the demureness of Amy Cooper. But, on the other hand, he reminded himself, Amy Cooper wasn't particularly demure at heart. She drank, too. He'd learned that tonight, along with a lot of other things.

Going up to Laura Lee's suite seemed to be merely a matter of continuing the educational process.

ONCE established on a sofa, glass in hand, Ronald relaxed. The liquor was good; it didn't seem to burn nearly as much as the Grain Alcohol. And Laura Lee, under the softer light of a lamp, didn't seem nearly as hard and brassy. In fact, she was almost subdued.

“Now,” she said. “Tell me about yourself.”

“There's really nothing to tell,”

Ronald said. But he started to talk, and somehow the words came out. He meant to mention only the incidents of the day, but in the end he seemed to find it necessary to explain a lot of things. About Amy Cooper, and five years in Ladies' Lingerie, and the maiden aunts, and Mr. Bickerstaff.

Laura Lee refilled his glass and her own several times, and talking became increasingly easy. Ronald told her about the bracelet again, and she nodded.

“You were right, you know,” she said. “I found it when I got backstage. It must have slipped down into — anyway, I found it. But by that time you were gone. And this Mr. Bickerstaff told me he'd fired you. I felt just awful about it.”

“You did?”

The girl's eyes widened. “Of course I did. Why do you suppose I went to that crummy gambling joint tonight? Do you think I spend all my time whooping it up?”

“I didn't know,” Ronald said. “I thought all movie stars went in for debauchery.”

“Sweet of you to say so.” Laura Lee splashed more whiskey into their glasses with an angry gesture. “But for your information, I'm not a movie star. Just a starlet. That's a polite word for a girl who gets a stock contract, dyes her hair platinum, and poses for pinup pictures when she isn't running around

the country on cheap publicity stunts like the Lingerie Show this afternoon."

She stood up and paced the carpet. "From the way you describe your relatives," she said, "you had aunts in your pants. They brought you up to be a Perfect Gentleman of the Old School. Isn't that it?"

Ronald nodded miserably.

"Well, I didn't have aunts," Laura Lee continued. "I just had Momma. Or, rather, she had me. Momma always wanted me to be a Great Actress. So while you were learning to wipe your feet on the doormat, I was taking tap and ballet and elocution lessons. I got a lot of rules shoved down my throat, too. But Momma had her way. Before she died, I got this studio contract. And for the past two years I've stayed, doing a few bad bits in a few bad pictures — but mostly posing and chasing around this way. Up until today you were under Mr. Bickerstaff's thumb. Well, I had Mr. Flick."

"Mr. Flick?" Ronald echoed.

"Mr. Flick is a flack. A public relations man to you; a cheap press-agent to me. He's the one who set up this deal today. He's the one who fired me after I raised glory hell about *you* being fired on account of that bracelet —"

"You raised hell on my account? And *you* got fired?"

She stared indignantly. "Well, he

said he'd notify the studio that I'd made a public scene, and they'd fire me. And he pulled out right after dinner. So I took a few drinks and went to this Ace Diamond's place; Flick had told me about it, he always knows about such things. I had five hundred dollars and I thought if I was really fired, maybe I'd better use the money and try and see if I could win some more. Only I didn't, until you came along and changed my luck. And then you saved me, like the chivalrous goof you are —"

"I'm not a chivalrous goof," Ronald protested.

"Never contradict a lady," said Laura Lee. And kissed him.

Ronald learned that Grain Alcohol is not the only thing that can produce a strong reaction.

SHE snuggled on his lap and stroked his forehead. "Thanks," she whispered. "Thanks for being so brave, and rushing me out of there. How you ever managed to jump up like that and put out the lights I'll never know — and diving out of the window that way was wonderful."

"B-but I didn't jump," Ronald insisted. "I flew. And when I went out the window I thought I could float down."

Laura Lee sat back, biting her lower lip. "Huh?" she commented.

"Didn't you realize I was flying?" Ronald persisted. "Wait, let me tell you about what happened this afternoon, after I got fired."

And he completed his story — from the moment he opened the Little Jim Dandy Home Chemical Set until his arrival at the gambling den.

When he finished, Laura Lee poured silently, drank swiftly. "So that's how it is," she said. "Psychic trauma."

It was Ronald's turn to say, "Huh?"

"Shock reaction," she said. "You poor, poor guy. Don't you see what happened? Getting fired that way just tore your world to bits, didn't it? So you went home and decided to end it all, didn't you?"

"Are you trying to tell me I'm crazy?" Ronald asked. "All this happened — I know it did."

Laura Lee shook her head. "Of course you're not crazy," she told him. "But you are mentally upset. Wanting to commit suicide proves it."

"Since when are you a psychiatrist?" Ronald demanded.

"You can't be in the movies for two years without learning something about psychiatry," Laura Lee answered. "That's all you hear. Anyway, just take my word for it. You were in a shock state, remember? So you took a drink — that Grain Alcohol is powerful stuff

and you're not used to liquor in any form. Then you ran into this pick-pocket and he brought you to Ace Diamond's place."

"But Amy Cooper and Stu Lacey," Ronald interjected. "I saw them."

"Fantasy," the girl sighed. "All fantasy. Like that stuff about drinking chemicals and flying."

"Look, I can prove it. Come home with me and I'll show you the chemistry set; you can see I drank out of it."

"At two in the morning?" Laura Lee smiled. "I'm not going up to your apartment to look at chemistry sets, believe me!" She giggled softly. "Why Ronald, you must be drunk — making like a wolf."

"I'm serious," he declared.

"I know you are. And so am I. Tomorrow I think you'd better see a doctor, just to clear this up. Then I'll take you back to Mr. Bickerstaff and see that you're given your job again." She sat down once more. "After all, it's the least I can do for you."

Ronald passed a hand across his forehead. He was beginning to feel a trifle woozy, what with the excitement and the liquor and the nearness of her. "I don't know," he murmured. "Maybe you're right and I did imagine most of what happened. You're quite sure I wasn't flying?"

"No," the girl admitted. "I'm

not. Everything happened so fast — you grabbed me and they started shooting. But I was under the impression that you jumped, carrying me. Of course, I'm no fool; I kept my eyes closed."

"I *know* I flew," Ronald insisted.

"All right, if you say so. But that can wait until tomorrow when you see the doctor."

"Tomorrow?" Suddenly Ronald remembered. In his experiences, real or imaginary, Amy Cooper had called the police. If it had actually occurred, then they would still be watching his apartment. He couldn't take the risk of going home.

And this was honestly all he had in the back of his mind when he faced the girl beside him and said, "What about tonight, though?"

Whatever Laura Lee had in the back of her mind, it didn't stay there long. "Why, Ronald!" she said, and moved into his arms.

CHAPTER V

MORRIE Bund, M. D. was a nervous man. This afternoon he had a nervous patient.

Ronald Weems faced him in the consulting room, clutching his chemistry set under one arm. Last night's experiences had unsettled him considerably, and he had awakened with Laura Lee and a large feeling of guilt.

The girl had insisted that he visit a physician, however, and Ronald in turn had been equally stubborn about picking up the chemistry set. Finally, in order to please him, Laura Lee had taken his key and ridden over to the apartment in a cab. There she picked up the Little Jim Dandy and returned with it, reporting that she had not encountered any members of the police force on the premises.

Ronald immediately opened the kit and brandished the partially empty vials and bottles. "See," he told her, "I did drink this stuff yesterday. This proves I could fly."

"It proves nothing of the sort," Laura Lee retorted. "Except that you're going to the nearest doctor for an examination."

The nearest doctor turned out to be Morris Bund, and while a determined Laura sat in the outer waiting-room, Ronald hesitantly told his story.

"It all started," he said "when I yanked off this girl's negligee."

Dr. Bund, who had been taking notes on his patient's age, weight and previous medical history, sat bolt upright. "You yanked off a girl's negligee?" he repeated, as though he hadn't quite heard aright. "Might I ask where this event took place?"

"Why, in a department store, of course. I work there."

"And is yanking off negligees one of your duties?"

"No, of course not," Ronald explained. "I was looking for a diamond bracelet."

Dr. Bund shook his head. "I'm not sure you've come to the right place," he sighed. "You ought to have gone to my brother-in-law, down the hall. He's a psychologist."

"I don't need a psychologist," Ronald insisted. "If you'd only listen to me—"

"Go ahead," Dr. Bund said, chewing on his mustache. "You were looking for a diamond bracelet. Yours, I presume?"

"No. It was stolen."

"Kleptomania," the Doctor muttered. "I knew you ought to see my brother-in-law."

"I'm not a kleptomaniac," Ronald shouted. "I'm only trying to tell you what led up to my condition. If I hadn't yanked off her negligee I wouldn't have been fired. If I hadn't been fired I wouldn't have tried to commit suicide —"

"Attempted suicide, eh?" The Doctor rose. "Really, Mr. Weems, if you'll permit me to call my brother-in-law in for consultation, I'm sure we'll get results."

"But I'm not here about the suicide effort," the young man persisted. "It's what happened afterwards. You see, I drank these chemicals and all at once I started

to float. Then I discovered I could fly, and also change the spots on dice, and when the gamblers started shooting at me I jumped out of the window. Now my only question is, Doctor — do you think there's anything wrong with me?"

Morrie Bund retreated towards the door. "Certainly not," he said. "From your story, I'd judge you are perfectly normal. What you just told me could happen to anyone. Now, if you'll excuse me just a moment, I have to make a phone-call."

He disappeared hastily, and Ronald tiptoed to the door and peered into the reception room. The nurse sat at her desk and Laura Lee paced the floor, but as he suspected, the Doctor was gone.

"Come on," Ronald told the starlet. "We're getting out of here. This guy thinks I'm crazy — he must have gone after his brother-in-law. He's a psychiatrist."

"But Ronald, don't you think perhaps —"

"I don't think perhaps," he answered. "Let's go. Hurry, now."

He opened the door leading to the outer hallway, then shrank back. "Take a look," he breathed. "Do you see what I see?"

The girl peered down the corridor.

"Yes," she whispered. "I do. Must have followed us from the hotel."

Sure enough, standing next to the elevator was Ace Diamond and his left-hand man Thorstein. They were engaged in a mumbled colloquy, although neither of them could have spelled it.

"That's what the desk-clerk said," Diamond muttered. "She went out with this guy right after she asked where she could find the nearest croaker."

"Think we plugged him last night?"

"I dunno. That isn't important. What I'm after is my dough. And also this character. Anybody that can fly —"

Laura Lee shut the door quietly. "They're waiting for us," she said. "Now what?"

"Stand guard," Ronald told her. "I'm going back into the office. It's safer there. When the Doctor comes back, I'll explain. Maybe he can let us out another way."

RONALD retreated once more and took his place beside the desk. Suddenly he felt giddy. On an impulse, he opened the Little Jim Dandy set and took out the bottle of Grain Alcohol. A healthy swig served to quiet his nerves. He decided to take another, and was just finishing the bottle when the door swung open.

He jumped, but it was only Morrie Bund. And behind him, a thin, bespectacled gentleman whom

Ronald immediately identified as the brother-in-law.

"This is Dr. Clobberheimer," the physician said. "I took the liberty of telling him about your case, and he's very much interested. I wonder if you'd just go over it with him while I step out for a cup of coffee?"

"No, don't go!" Ronald cried. "I have to tell you something first." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "There are a couple of gangsters out in the hall now. They're after me."

Dr. Bund exchanged a significant glance with his relative. Then he beamed at his patient. "I'll be very careful," he promised. "You needn't worry about me."

"I'm worried about myself," Ronald murmured. "What can I do?"

"Just relax. They won't bother you as long as you're in here," said Dr. Clobberheimer in a soothing voice.

"All right." Ronald slumped wearily in his seat as Morrie Bund made his exit. "Maybe you'll believe me," he said.

"Of course." Dr. Clobberheimer gave him a thin smile. "I'm sure there's a logical explanation for all this."

"That's the spirit." Ronald was heartened. "You see, I guess I didn't explain matters too clearly to Doctor Bund. First of all, there's

my background."

"Right." Dr. Clobberheimer leaned forward. "In cases like this background material is all-important. To begin with, what do you do?"

"I'm in Ladies' Lingerie," Ronald told him.

"Aha!" said the psychiatrist. "A transvestite, eh?"

"You don't understand — I'm not in Ladies' Lingerie any more, not since yesterday."

"Obviously," Dr. Clobberheimer purred. "I can see that for myself. You're dressed quite normally, I agree."

"But I *am* normal," Ronald wheezed. "It's just that last night I was able to float, and to fly."

"The flying dream," muttered the savant. "Very commonplace, that. Of course you realize the Freudian interpretation?"

"It wasn't a dream. It happened. I drank some chemicals from this set here." Ronald exhibited the Little Jim Dandy outfit. "First," he said. "I took on quite a lot of Grain Alcohol. Matter of fact, I just finished the rest of the bottle a few minutes ago. Otherwise I could offer you a drink."

"And then we'd both fly together, eh?" Dr. Clobberheimer said.

"Nothing of the sort! Are you inferring I merely suffered from hallucinations?"

"Grain Alcohol can have that ef-

fect," Clobberheimer told him. "But my brother-in-law mentioned a suicide attempt, too. That's what really bothers me. What happened?"

"Give me a glass and I'll show you," Ronald said. The psychiatrist handed him a water tumbler. Ronald opened the vials and bottles and, carefully estimating the amount by the height of the liquids remaining, quickly duplicated the potion he had consumed last night.

"Here," he said. "This is what I drank. And then I floated and flew and guessed the spots on dice. I could predict what was coming up, even change the spots —"

"Delusions of teleportation, levitation, and telekinesis," Dr. Clobberheimer said. "Very, very interesting." He leaned forward. "Young man, I believe you need a thorough examination and a prolonged rest. A few months or so in a private institution—"

"Never!" Ronald stood up. "I'm telling you the truth."

"As you see it," Dr. Clobberheimer purred. "But I'm afraid you don't realize the gravity of the situation."

"Yes I do." Ronald lifted the glass. "When I drink this stuff, the gravity of the situation is that there is no gravity."

"Wait a minute —" the Doctor shouted.

"I guess there's only one way to

prove that I'm not lying," Ronald said. And drank the bubbling, fizzing brew.

Waves of heat coursed through him. Clobberheimer rushed from the office, summoning Dr. Bund's nurse. "Get a stomach-pump!" he shouted. "A man just tried to commit suicide."

THE nurse swung into action, with Laura and the psychiatrist behind her. Armed with a revoking-looking instrument, the efficient disciple of Florence Nightingale returned to the consultation room.

Ronald awaited her calmly, hands folded across his chest.

Clobberheimer turned to Laura. "You'd better go outside," he said. "There may be a painful scene, in case he turns violent. One never knows, in cases like these."

The platinum blonde trembled. "You mean — he *is* crazy?" she quavered.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Dr. Clobberheimer reassured her. "Just a touch of paranoia, with schizophrenic complications, plus a bit of hysteria."

"What does that mean in English?"

"He's nuttier than a fruitcake. Go outside," the psychiatrist told her.

Laura retreated.

Doctor and nurse advanced.

"Get up on the table, Mr. Weems," the thin psychotherapist coaxed. "Get up on the table and let the nice nurse use the nice stomach-pump."

"Come one step closer," Ronald warned, "and I'll take off."

"Nurse has seen men undress before," Dr. Clobberheimer said.

"I'm not talking about undressing. I mean I'll fly."

"Mustn't fly off the handle," the Doctor cooed. And, softly, to the nurse, "Get behind him now — quickly!"

They lunged, one from in front and one from in back. Lunged, and collided with each other. For Ronald wasn't standing there any more.

He was sitting upside down on the ceiling.

"Oh my goodness!" breathed the nurse.

"Great Jung!" murmured the Doctor. "Jumping *gestalt*, what's the meaning of this?"

"I told you," Ronald said. "Now, what about watching this?"

In rapid succession, he offered a demonstration of walking on the ceiling, flying from one side of the room to another, and floating gracefully in mid-air.

"Levitation," Dr. Clobberheimer said. "Good Stekel, I'd never have believed it! You do have the power of teleportation after all."

"And what was that other business?" Ronald called.

"Telekinesis. The ability to move objects through mental power."

"Such as those coins in your pocket?"

As Ronald spoke he closed his eyes. A shower of silver emerged from Dr. Clobberheimer's trouser-pocket and dropped to the table.

"I never really tried this before," Ronald muttered. "When I willed the dice, I thought it was just making a wish. I didn't know I was actually moving them. And when I called the results, it was a combination of telepathy and telekinesis, apparently. Such as this — when I make all your coins land heads up."

As he uttered the phrase, half of the coins on the table rose and spun forward. Doctor and nurse examined them.

"He can do it, all right!" Clobberheimer frowned. "I'll be a dirty Behaviorist if he can't!"

"Now do you understand?" Ronald persisted. "It's something in the combination of those chemicals. Apparently the effect of the dose I took lasts about four hours and then wears off. But until it does, I can do almost anything I want — fly and all the rest."

"This is important!" the psychiatrist said. "It opens up vast new vistas. Professor Rhine's experiments are nothing compared to this. We've used narcohypnotic therapy, why not chemical aids for

the *psi*-factors? Mr. Weems, I believe you've stumbled onto something vital and revolutionary. The first step will be to analyze the exact chemical components of that solution you mixed. Then we'll arrange a series of demonstrations, get a patent on the formula, and —"

"Later," Ronald said. "Right now, I want you to do me a favor."

"Anything," Dr. Clobberheimer told him. "Anything at all."

"Just step outside and tell my girl to come in," Ronald urged. "I want you to inform her I'm not crazy."

"Delighted," the Doctor answered.

But he was not delighted when he opened the door leading to the outer office.

"She seems to have left," he murmured.

"Left? But that's impossible. Or — oh, no!" Ronald swooped through the doorway, headed for the second door leading into the hall. It too was deserted. Ace Diamond and his henchman had gone.

"They kidnapped her, that's what they did!" Ronald muttered.

"Who kidnapped what?"

"Those gangsters I told you about. That part was true, too!" Ronald danced on air helplessly. Suddenly he turned and sailed down the corridor.

"Come back!" shouted the psy-

chiatrist. "Where are you going?"

"After her, of course!" Ronald said. "Hang onto my chemical set, though. I'll be back."

The nurse blinked unbelievably. "Look at him go," she whispered softly. "Just like a bird."

Dr. Clobberheimer nodded. "Something tells me," he said, "that the goose hangs high."

CHAPTER VI

RONALD wasn't exactly hanging, and he wasn't exactly off on a wild goose chase. As he spiralled down the staircase and landed upright once more in the lobby, he had already come to a definite conclusion. Ace Diamond must have taken Laura Lee to his establishment. Why, he didn't know — but there was one sure way of finding out.

Ronald glanced at the crowded street and realized he'd never dare to take a chance on flying in broad daylight. And, as is inevitable whenever one is desperately needed, there wasn't a taxi in sight. Ronald sighed, then thought of his telekinesis.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. Abruptly, a cab ground to a halt at the curb before him.

The driver was cursing melodiously. "Better not get in, Mister," he said. "Something's gone wrong with the steering gear. I was just

coming up Stover Street, heading straight, when I swear this heap did a U-turn and landed me over here."

"I'm sure you'll find there won't be any more trouble," Ronald assured him. He climbed in and gave the warehouse address and they started off.

In daylight the warehouse looked less forbidding. Ronald paid the driver and headed for the front door. He rapped several times with no answer. The door was locked. Taking a look around to make sure he was unobserved, the young man flapped his arms and ascended to hover on air outside the second-storey window. It wasn't fastened, and he had no trouble gaining entrance.

But the gambling joint, like the dummy warehouse below, was deserted. Ronald shook his head. Of course; it would be too much to hope for that Ace Diamond would bring the girl here. For the moment he was stymied.

He went back to the window again and stared out. Perhaps he ought to notify the police. They would know what to do. But one of the things they'd do would be to lock him up — after all, Amy Cooper and Stu Lacey had issued a complaint. Besides, trying to explain his peculiar condition was impossible; he'd already gone through that ordeal. No, the police were

out. The situation was hopeless.

Ronald stared out across the river at the city. So much had happened in the last twenty-four hours that he could scarcely comprehend anything in proper perspective. Certainly the city itself seemed different. Heretofore it was a forbidding spectacle to Ronald; a vast stone maze through which he crept unnoticed and unnerved.

Now it no longer presented the same challenge; the stone walls weren't obstacles, for he could fly above them. A chemical miracle had done that for him, and a glandular miracle as well. Maybe the Little Jim Dandy set had enabled his body to fly, but Laura Lee was the one who had sent his spirit soaring. Laura Lee — he had to find the girl, had to —

SOMETHING sputtered and purred in the alleyway below. Ronald glanced down and his eyes focussed on a red convertible with a broken top, slowly backing into a parking area.

"Miltie!" he breathed, and launched himself out of the window. A moment later he came to rest beside the vehicle. Sure enough, Guilty Miltie was at the wheel.

"What are you doing here?" Ronald inquired.

"Bringing the car back, like I said I would," Miltie told him. "I been driving around and thinking

things over, and I decided to go straight from now on. Even gonna get me a job."

"What kind of a job?"

"Well, I dunno," Miltie mused. "I allus had kind of a way with kids. So maybe I'll try peddling reefers."

The little man beamed virtuously. "But how come you're back here too?" he asked.

Ronald told him, telegram-fashion, in ten words.

"Put the snatch on her, huh?" Miltie mused. "Sounds bad, don't it?"

"Never mind how it sounds," Ronald answered. "What I want to know is, where'd he take her?"

"Prolly out to his country place," Miltie decided. "He's got a greenhouse down the road about five miles."

"A greenhouse?" Ronald was surprised. "I never thought Ace Diamond was the type who went in for horticulture."

"Oh, he likes them, too," Miltie assured him. "Even if they ain't got no culture."

"I mean I never thought he'd raise flowers."

"But he does," Miltie insisted. "He raises poppies. For opium, you know."

"Could you drive me to the greenhouse now?" Ronald asked.

"I ain't suppose to drive this car," Miltie pointed out. "It's not

my propitty."

"Well, I could fly you there, I suppose."

"In daylight? Not me, buddy! Them farmers'd think we was a flying saucer or something and haul out the old shotguns." He sighed heavily. "Might as well get in," he said. "I'll take you."

So it was that Ronald and his loose-fingered friend careened out of town, down a county trunk road, and up the pathway to the small, tree-bordered dwelling beside the glassed-in greenhouse.

"They're here, all right," Miltie exclaimed. "I recognize his car in back. The one with the gun-turret on top."

Ronald alighted from the car.

"Careful!" Miltie warned. "They can see us out here. Liable to pop you."

As if ready and willing to prove this statement, the door of the cottage swung open and Ace Diamond appeared, a motherly smile on his face as he glanced down at the machine-gun cradled in his arms.

"Don't move!" he called. "That means both of you. No flying, no funny business either. The girl's inside."

"Then you admit you kidnapped her?"

"Admit it? I've been trying to reach you on the phone ever since we got here. Now I see you saved me a dime. Much obliged."

"I don't understand," Ronald said.

"So I'll make it real simple." Ace Diamond grinned. "We got your girl, right?"

"Not right, but you've got her," Ronald answered, bitterly.

"And you've got something we want," Diamond told him.

"What's that?"

"This flying gimmick." Ace Diamond shook his head. "I never seen nothing to compare with that little trick you pulled off last night. I couldn't get to sleep, just thinking about it. And finally, it come to me."

"What come to you?" little Miltie piped up.

"Why, the idea, of course. How to use this gimmick in my business. Now you take like a bank, for instance. I never touched one before, account of the burglar alarms. They got all the cages and stuff wired. Minute you touch 'em, or even show up with a rod, somebody knows. But suppose you didn't touch 'em. Suppose you just flew over 'em and didn't pull a rod until you was right inside with the cashier? And instead of making a getaway in a hot car, you just flew off?"

"Who, me?" Ronald demanded, incredulously.

"Yeah, you! That's my deal, chum. You rob me a bank, I give you back your dame. Fair enough?"

Ronald hesitated, then shook his head. "Never," he said.

ACE Diamond lifted the muzzle of the machine-gun. "I'm not kidding," he said. "It's either-or. And you better make up your mind in a hurry, because I'm tired of holding this thing. It's too heavy. I never could figure out how Burt Lancaster does it in the movies."

Ronald gulped and glanced at Guilty Miltie. Miltie gulped back at him.

"He means it, Dad," whispered the pickpocket. "So which do you wanna be — a live bank-robber or a dead duck?"

"I can't hold up a bank," Ronald insisted. "I've had no experience."

"You've had no experience bein' dead, either," Miltie reminded him. "Also, there's the girl."

Ronald sighed. "Yes," he said. "There's the girl." He turned to face Ace Diamond once more. "All right. I'll do it."

"Now you're talking!" The gambler urged them forward. "Just step inside and let's make plans. Tonight's downtown shopping night — everything's open. The way I got it figured —"

But Ronald didn't listen to him. He could see Laura Lee sitting on the sofa inside the cottage. The hood named Thorstein sat next to her, yet she seemed none the worse

for wear. At the sight of Ronald, she rose and came forward.

"Darling — are you all right?"

"Sure," Ronald told her. "I'm just fine. I've been captured and in a little while I'm going to rob a bank. What more could I ask?" He turned to Ace Diamond. "Promise she goes free if I do the job?"

"Scout's honor," said Ace Diamond.

Laura Lee squeezed the young man's arm. "You're doing this for me, aren't you?" she whispered. "Oh, Ronald — to think I got you out of Lingerie and into all this trouble!"

"Not your fault," he answered.

Ace Diamond coughed discreetly. "Sorry to break up the scene," he said, "but we gotta get down to business." He seated himself at the kitchen table and summoned Thorstein to keep an eye — and a pistol — cocked on the prisoners.

"Suppose I draw you a diagram," he began. "Now the First National Bank has a layout like this—"

Half an hour later he had covered the tablecloth with lines and done the same to his forehead.

"It's no use," he sighed. "No matter how you work it, robbing a big bank just ain't a one-man job." He turned to Ronald. "You can see that, can't you? Even if you fly, it takes a man to cover the front door and a man for the guard, and a third guy to stick a gun on the

crowd, and a fourth guy to handle the tellers and cashiers, and a fifth guy to actually collect the dough."

"Then I don't have to rob the bank?" Ronald asked, eagerly.

"Right." Ace Diamond smiled. "The robbery's off. I'll just rub you out, instead."

"Rub me out?"

"Sorry. That's the way the ball bounces."

"Tough," Guilty Miltie consoled. "Hate to see you go like this, pal."

"You're going, too," Ace Diamond decided. "No witnesses."

"Who — me?" Guilty Miltie hopped up and down in his chair. "But you can't do *that*! I'm on your side, I'm just as big a crook as you are! Ain't you got no ethics?"

Ace Diamond shook his head.

GUILTY Miltie snapped his fingers. "Hey, wait a minute," he said. "Maybe I got an answer figured out."

"Better make it fast," Diamond advised. "Thorstein here is getting itchy."

"While he's scratchin' hisself, listen to this." Guilty Miltie leaned forward. "You say it takes five or six guys to knock off a big bank, huh?"

"Right."

"So what's stoppin' you? You got five or six guys on your payroll, ain't so?"

"What's stopping us," Ace Dia-

mond explained patiently, "is that none of us can fly like Ronald, here."

"But you *can*!" Miltie exclaimed. "All's you need is some of them there chemical sets."

"What chemical sets?"

"Don't tell them!" Ronald whispered. But it was too late. The little pickpocket had already launched on his explanation. Diamond listened attentively, and the smile came back.

"So you see how it is," Miltie concluded. "You just go down to Lacey's Department Store and buy yourself a bunch of Little Jim Dandy Home Chemistry outfits, or whatever they're called. And you're in business." He grinned up at the gambler. "Now, if you'll let us all go, we'll be square, huh?"

"Uh-uh." Ace Diamond shook his head.

"Whatsamatter, don't you believe me?"

"Of course I believe you," the gambler answered. "But it isn't that simple. First off, we got to get the sets. And if you think any of the gang is gonna walk into that department store with their bare faces hanging out and buy such stuff, you're crazy. If it works, and we rob the bank, some smart copper'll put two and two together. Also, we got to know a few other things — such as just how to mix

the chemicals, and all that."

"But Ronald here can tell you what to use," Miltie pointed out.

"He can, but he won't," Ronald said, firmly.

"I think different," Diamond told him. "Which do you want for supper — a bellyful of porkchops or a bellyful of lead?"

"Well, now that you put it that way —"

"I also think something else," Ace Diamond went on. "I think *you* are the guy who can go downtown and buy those chemistry sets for us." He glanced at Thorstein for confirmation. "Sure, why not? You know your way around the store and everything. Just take a fast run down there right now. You'll be back in time for supper. I'll get the rest of the boys lined up and right after we eat, you can show us how to mix up that flying cocktail over yours. Then we can knock over the bank tonight, before downtown shopping closes. Nice, fast job."

Ronald glanced at Laura Lee. Then he squared his shoulders. "All right," he said. "I'll do it." He stood up and headed for the door.

"Wait a minute," Ace Diamond called after him. "You got company. I'm sending Thorstein along, just to keep an eye on you. Not that I don't trust you or anything." He chuckled. "And one more

thing. I suppose you hope maybe somebody will recognize you and remember. Or somebody will recognize Thorstein. Well, I got a way around that, too. This is almost Christmas shopping season, you know. Well, on the way downtown, here's what you're gonna do —"

CHAPTER VII

AND that's what they did. Less than an hour later, Ronald and the gangster named Thorstein emerged from the Carnival Costume Shoppe wearing outfits that were a veritable smorgasbord for moths.

"Santa Claus, yet!" Thorstein grumbled. "At my age, I gotta put on a crummy red suit and whiskers and carry a dopey bag around."

"If you'd only listen to me," Ronald said, "you wouldn't need to. Just let me go to the police, explain everything, and we'll be all right."

"No dice," Thorstein told him. "It would ruin me in the profession. So just follow orders, see? And remember, Santa Claus or no Santa Claus, I still got this heater on you. None of those flying tricks tonight."

Sighing, Ronald led the way to Lacey's Department Store.

It was almost the dinner-hour, and although the place was open for the coming evening, the crowd

was light. For this small favor, Ronald was duly grateful. Few customers bothered to observe the passage of the two Santa Clauses down the first-floor aisle. Ronald felt conspicuous enough as it was; besides, his beard was tickling him.

Through the ride back to town, he had been awaiting an opportunity to fly, to say nothing of flee — but Thorstein was always alert. Now, as they invaded the department store, he realized that even if he had the chance, flying would soon be out of the question. His four hours were almost up; the influence of the chemicals would be wearing off.

Meanwhile, there was work to be done.

But Thorstein, oddly enough, seemed in no particular hurry. Walking along at his side, the hoodlum suddenly remarked, "That stuff about the chemicals is true, huh?"

"Definitely," Ronald assured him.

"What do they call it when a guy floats and flies like that?"

"Levitation."

"And what about moving those dice, the way you did last night?"

"Telekinesis."

"Well, let's see some."

"What do you mean?"

"You heard me," the hoodlum growled. "Let's see some. There's the jewelry counter. You got that

canvas bag. Let's see you make some of them necklaces and stuff move into the bag."

"But that would be stealing —"

"If I shoot you, that would be murder," Thorstein assured him, "But I'm gonna, unless you obey orders."

Ronald, blushing beneath his beard, concentrated on a tray of necklaces standing on the jewelry counter. Almost instantly, they slithered, snake-like, into the gaping depths of the bag he carried.

"Wow!" Thorstein observed. "What a deal." He tugged Ronald along the aisle. How about some stockings, hey? My girlfriend could use a few pair."

"This isn't a shopping tour," Ronald reminded him. "Nor a shoplifting tour, either. Suppose we're caught?"

"Nylons," Thorstein insisted. "And then maybe we can get her a purse."

Trembling, Ronald approached the stocking-counter. Once more he performed his telekinetichnique, and once again escaped undetected.

"Purses, now!" said the triggerman, happily. "Let's pick out a big one — my girlfriend likes to carry her heater inside. You know how dames are."

Ronald nodded. Urged by the goadings of the gunman, Ronald managed to acquire, in rapid succession, a red velvet purse, a large

flagon of perfume, two ashtrays, and the attention of a thin gentleman wearing a derby hat.

"Don't look now," Ronald whispered, "but that's Amos Shamus, the store detective. I think he's spotted us."

"Awright," Thorstein growled. "Let's get up to the Toy Department and buy those chemical sets and beat it."

THEY sought an elevator, and the detective followed, unobtrusively. Just as unobtrusively, Thorstein poked his gun in the neighborhood of Ronald's kidneys. "Don't tip him off," he whispered, "or you get it. If he makes trouble, stall him."

The elevator brought them to Toyland and they hastened down the aisle to the counter where the chemistry sets were displayed — and where, Ronald noted, Miss Amy Cooper was also displaying herself.

As they neared the girl, Amos Shamus stepped up and tapped Ronald on the shoulder.

"Pardon me," he said, "but might I ask what you have in that bag?"

"Christmas presents, of course," Ronald replied, prompted by the jab of the gun in his back.

"Kind of early for delivery," the detective grunted. "Seeing as how Christmas is six weeks off yet."

"But you don't understand," Ronald said. "I'm not getting them for gifts. They're — well, they're for the store here. I suppose you saw me picking them off the counters."

"Then you admit it," the detective answered. "I thought I saw you at work."

"Of course you did." Ronald forced a smile through his whiskers. "Me and my partner here, we work for the store. Up here in Toyland. He's the head Santa Claus and I'm his assistant. He has seniority because his beard is longer."

"Work here, huh?" Amos Shamus didn't seem quite convinced.

"Certainly. Didn't Mr. Lacey tell you about it downstairs? It was his idea." Ronald babbled. "We sit on a throne, you know, and hand out gifts to the kiddies. Every once in a while we run out of merchandise and have to go down and replenish our stock for the little brats, bless them."

Thorstein nodded in confirmation, but Amos Shamus reached for Ronald's sack.

"Let's see what you've got in there," he demanded. He thrust his arm inside and came up with an ashtray and the flagon of perfume.

"Fine stuff for kiddies," he commented. "Ashtrays, yet. And what about this perfume?"

"That's for a kid who doesn't

smoke," Thorstein supplied, unhelpfully.

The detective inspected the perfume with startled eyes. "*Scents of Sin*," he murmured. "What kind of a business is that?"

"Some of the girls are a bit precocious," Ronald told him. "You know how it is."

"I don't know how it is," Amos Shamus said. "I'm a respectable married man, with eleven children."

"With eleven children you'd hardly have a chance to be anything else," Ronald said. He waved at the detective. "Keep the perfume. Maybe one of your kids could use it."

At this juncture Amy Cooper entered into the conversation. Leaning over the counter, she regarded Ronald with curious eyes.

"Don't I know you?" she asked. "Your voice sounds very familiar."

"This is my first day on the job," Ronald answered. "My partner and I are just on our way to Santa's Throne. We merely stopped by to pick up half a dozen of these chemistry sets. You know, the Little Jim Dandy outfits."

"Little Jim Dandy?" Amy Cooper's eyes widened. Reaching out abruptly, she yanked Ronald's beard. "I thought so! It's *you* again!"

"Amy, don't!" Ronald gasped. But it was too late. First his beard,

and then all hell, broke loose.

"Aha!" shouted Amos Shamus, reaching for his gun.

"Drop it!" shouted Thorstein, who didn't have to reach. "Now, hustle!" He turned to Ronald. "Stick six of them sets in your bag."

"Why not in yours — there's more room," Ronald suggested.

"Oh no there ain't," Thorstein grunted softly. "On account of *he* goes in my bag. *And* her."

A little knot of customers and salespeople collected just in time to view the spectacle. True to his word, Thorstein stuffed first the detective and then Amy Cooper into his sack and knotted the neck tightly.

"What is all this, some kind of publicity stunt?" asked one of the clerks.

"Must be. Nobody would be giving *people* away as a Christmas present, would they?" asked her partner.

"Make a nice gift to some cannibal, perhaps," replied the first.

"I never thought of that. But then, who wants to give gifts to cannibals? Maybe they don't even celebrate Christmas."

"That doesn't look like a publicity stunt to me," said a portly gentleman. "Not the way those two in the sack are squealing. I think somebody should call the police. Do

it myself."

He waddled away and Thorstein whirled.

"All right," he snapped. "You got the sets? Then come on — let's go!"

"And run into the cops downstairs?" Ronald answered. "You heard what that man said about calling the police."

"Then we'll fly," Thorstein decided.

"But the power — it only lasts about four hours — I may run out of gas, or levitatory force or whatever, right in midair."

"You'd better not!" Thorstein grated, grimly. "Quick, over to the windows!"

Ronald gazed down from the sixth floor at the city below. If he jumped and couldn't fly it would be sheer suicide. If he didn't jump — the gun in his back told him it would be sheer murder.

Thorstein, clutching the sackful of chemical sets, grabbed him around the waist.

"Let's go!" he commanded. "From the looks of things, the law is already here."

Indeed, the boys in blue were pouring out of two elevators simultaneously. Ronald caught only a glimpse of them before the gun pressed and he jumped.

There was a moment of frantic falling, and then he kicked his legs and willed himself to straighten

out.

Let go of my arms," he panted. "I need them for steering."

"Gawd!" breathed the gangster. "What a way to travel. I just forgot that I get airsick when I fly."

"You'll be worse than airsick if the chemicals give out," Ronald reminded him. "Here we go."

And there they went, across the twilight city. Ronald flew high, despite his burden; grateful for the dusk that masked his progress. He headed for the river — he could follow it to the country road.

"Think we'll make it?" Thorstein breathed.

"Guess so. We're almost over the river now," Ronald told him. And then, as he lurched, "Oh-oh! Guess I spoke too soon. Something — something is happening — look out—"

"Stop!" Thorstein screamed. "We're going down!"

"I know it," Ronald panted. "But I can't stop. I don't have any brakes."

"We'll fall right in the river," Thorstein yelled. "We'll be drowned."

"Drowned," Ronald corrected him.

"Now he tells me!" sobbed the gangster. "Oops —" They hit the water with a splash, and disappeared.

“SO that’s how it happened,” Ronald told Ace Diamond, as he dripped on the rug before the cottage fireplace. “Thorstein was out cold when I managed to drag him up on the bank. You’ll probably find him there. I had to walk the rest of the way. Here are the chemical sets — all the stuff you’ll want to use is in bottles and vials, so there’s no harm done.”

The fat gambler grunted. “Nice of you to come back,” he said. “Why didn’t you take it on the lam?”

Ronald made a helpless gesture. “Where could I go?” he sighed. “The police are looking for me all over town. Besides, I had to bring you this stuff, so that you’d let Laura Lee go. That was our bargain, remember?”

“Right.” Ace Diamond showed the 18½ carats of fillings in his teeth. “Just one more little thing, though. You’ll have to show me and the boys how to mix these chemicals for a proper dose.”

Ronald stared around the room. In addition to Laura Lee and Guilty Miltie, five of Diamond’s henchmen were henching all over the place.

“Come here, boys,” Diamond ordered. “And pay attention.”

Ronald opened the topmost Little Jim Dandy set and began to collect glasses from the cupboard. Carefully, he measured out the

Grain Alcohol.

“This first,” he commanded. “All of it.”

Laura Lee bit her lip. “Ronald —” she began, then fell silent as he glanced at her.

“It’s the only way,” he said. “Now, everybody, drink.”

The gambler and his pack dutifully downed the concoction.

Ronald set to work with vials and flasks. Diamond squared his jaw. “No funny stuff, now,” he said. “This had better make us fly or else.”

“You’ll fly,” Ronald promised. “But be patient. I have to remember exactly the right quantities of everything. There must be some kind of delicate chemical stasis achieved, I imagine. Now — I think I’ve got it. If you’ll all please drink —”

Diamond lifted his glass. “Okay, boys,” he murmured. “Here’s to crime.”

They gulped in unison.

“I don’t feel any different,” Diamond declared. “Kind of woozy, but no different.”

“Wait a minute or two,” Ronald counseled. “It takes time to work. Now — try to float.”

“How?”

“Just sort of let yourself go limp, and imagine that you’re rising. There, like that.”

Ace Diamond smiled and rose to the ceiling like a fat balloon. He

hung there, leering. "You did it!" he exulted. "Come on, boys — try it."

They tried it. In a moment all six were suspended from the ceiling.

"Gawd, what a sight!" Guilty Miltie breathed. "Looks like we're off to a flying start!"

Laura Lee observed them open-mouthed. Finally she managed to speak. "Ronald — then it *is* true! You're not whacky, after all."

"Of course I'm not, darling."

"Somehow, I almost wish you were," said the girl. "When I think of what you've done. Now they'll go out and rob the bank, maybe kill a few innocent bystanders —"

"I had to do it," Ronald soothed. "It was the only way to save you, remember?"

ACE Diamond flew around the room in a lazy circle, like a wingless walrus, and lighted again before the fireplace. "Come on down, boys," he called. "Let's get organized. We'd better get started. You all have your instructions."

Ronald rose, grasping Laura Lee by the arm. "Well, you won't be needing us any more," he said. "So we might as well be going."

Yeah," Guilty Miltie added. "Have a nice time at the bank-robbery. Money happy returns and all that."

"Hey!" Diamond's voice — and gun — halted them. "Not so fast!"

"But you promised if I got you the chemicals, we'd be free," Ronald protested. "Scout's honor."

"Fooled you that time," Ace Diamond chuckled. "On accounta because I never was a Scout. My old lady wouldn't let me join — said they played too rough." He scowled. "You folks are coming with us, see? We need you."

"I told you I wouldn't rob a bank —"

"Who's asking you to? All you and the little jerk and the lady got to do is fly along with us and come inside. We'll just use you for shields, in case anybody wants to start shooting."

He turned to his cohorts. "Grab 'em," he ordered. "And let's go."

Within moments, the illy-assorted gathering was soaring through the nighted skies towards the city. Ronald and Guilty Miltie were held securely by two of the thugs, while Ace Diamond himself carried Laura Lee. It was definitely not a pleasant journey, although Diamond seemed to think so.

"Won't be long now," he gloated. "What an idea! Look at the trouble we save, not having to monkey around with wiring systems and burglar alarms. We don't even need a getaway car. And think of the dough we used to waste on gasoline! If we knock over the First National Bank tonight, nothing can stop us. Tomorrow we can knock

over the Second National Bank, and the next day we'll tackle the Third. Why, this here flying gimmick is gonna revolutionize the whole bank-robbing industry!"

"Look, boss," said one of the henchmen, flying close. "How do we know this joker didn't double-cross us? Maybe he tipped off the cops and they're waiting for us to show up."

"Not likely," Diamond told him.

Ronald, overhearing the remark, added bitter confirmation. "The last people I'd go to would be the police," he said. "It seems to me as if I've spent the past forty-eight hours being chased by either cops or robbers, or both. You needn't worry."

And they didn't. "Here we are," Diamond shouted suddenly, as he swooped down towards a tall building. The others followed.

"Fly in the shadows," the gambler cautioned. "Land here in the parking lot." The group obeyed orders. Once on the ground they proceeded in a wedge formation towards the door of the First National Bank.

"In we go," Diamond said. "Never mind the customers. Hurry up, that alcohol's making me dizzy."

Pushing Laura Lee before him, he entered the bank. Two more gunmen grasped Ronald and propelled him forward. The others

dragged a struggling and protesting Guilty Miltie.

Employees and customers glanced up idly as the group entered, but nobody had any intimation of what was about to occur until the entire party suddenly became airborne.

FROM a height of ten feet above the cashier's cage, Ace Diamond suddenly shouted, "Reach, everybody! This is a stickup." Guns in the hands of the hovering henchmen threatened aerial bombardment.

Arms rose and jaws dropped.

"Fine," Ace Diamond said. He dropped towards the rear of the cashier's cage. "Now, I want everything you got, and I want it fast." He landed solidly behind the counter, pressing Laura Lee before him. The cashier glanced at his gun, then hesitated.

"Three seconds," Ace Diamond said. And wobbled. "Oops!" he said. "Did I hear something crash?"

He did indeed. One of the gunmen suddenly plummeted to the floor and lay there, writhing. There was another thump as a second of the party fell, dragging Guilty Miltie after him. Then, in rapid succession, the three remaining henchmen followed suit. Ronald landed on his feet and raced towards the gambler.

Ace Diamond's face was now as blue as a baboon's backside, and equally expressive. He tried to steady himself against the counter. "Back —" he wheezed. "Or I'll shoot —"

He brought up the gun and then toppled forward. There was a final thud and he too was out like a lout.

Then Laura Lee was in Ronald's arms, the cashier was on the phone, and the police were everywhere.

After that came confusion, excitement, and eventually, explanations. The entire party was hauled down to the police station, and it wasn't for quite a while that Ronald and Guilty Miltie were released from the cell housing Ace Diamond and his five comatose companions.

But finally they told their story, and were officially released.

Laura Lee met them outside.

"I still don't understand what you did to them," she sighed. "I had a wild hunch you might try changing the chemicals in some way — and yet they could fly, right up until the last."

"I didn't change the chemicals," Ronald grinned. "All I did was add something. On the way back after falling in the river I stopped at a tavern. It took a lot of talking and a considerable amount of money, but I got what I wanted to use in the Grain Alcohol."

"What was it?"

"I wouldn't know the chemical name," Ronald confessed. "Phenop-something. But it worked. You see, I remembered a remark some kid made the first time he saw one of these sets. Something about using them to mix up a Mickey Finn. That's what I put in the Grain Alcohol. And it worked."

"Boy, did it work!" Guilty Miltie exclaimed. "You should of seen, in the cell —"

Ronald silenced him with a look. "Never mind," he said.

"Okay, Dad." The little pick-pocket waved his hand. "I'll be shoving off, I guess."

Ronald held out his hand. "Right. Good luck. Oh, by the way, what are your plans?"

"I'm gonna retire, I guess," Guilty Miltie said. "Now that I'm rich."

"Rich?"

"Sure. Just pulled my last job, while we was in the cell. Neatest bit of pickpocketing anybody could ask for." Miltie slid his hand into his trousers and then withdrew it, palm upward. Resting between his fingers was a glittering array of diamonds.

"Lifted them right outta Ace Diamond's teeth," he exulted. "Guy never even stirred!"

He padded off, but neither Ronald nor Laura Lee noticed his departure. They were already making tracks for the Hanover Hotel.

It wasn't until the next day that they were really bothered by reporters. And it wasn't until the day after that that the call came from Hollywood.

"That was Flick!" Laura Lee reported. "They want me back at the studio. All that newspaper publicity and everything — it's got them excited. Promised me a decent role right away, to cash in on the notoriety."

"Well, let's get started then," Ronald said. "I've done my job. Just been down to see the guy who manufactures those chemistry sets. Turns out his name really is Jim Dandy, too. Anyway, I explained everything and he's taking the set off the market. But we're turning the formula over to the government. Make a nice defense weapon."

"Did you see the papers, darling?" Laura Lee asked. "There's an item announcing that your old girl friend is getting married."

"To Stu Lacey, I suppose," Ronald nodded. "Well, anyway, I beat her to it."

"That you did." Laura Lee smiled, smugly. "So let's you act like a husband and go order our plane reservations for Hollywood."

"Plane reservations!" Ronald paled. "Not on your life! We're going on the train. No more flying for me!"

"All right," the girl answered. "Maybe it's just as well those chemicals don't have any permanent effects at that."

AS it turned out, her assurance was a bit premature. But the realization didn't come until almost a year later, when a nurse came flying into her room at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital, just as Laura Lee came out of the anaesthetic.

She smiled up at the nurse and murmured. "What is it — boy or girl?"

The nurse gulped. "It's a boy," she gasped. "A bouncing baby boy." Her voice rose to a wail. "But that's just the trouble, lady. How do we get him to stop bouncing against the ceiling?"

THE END

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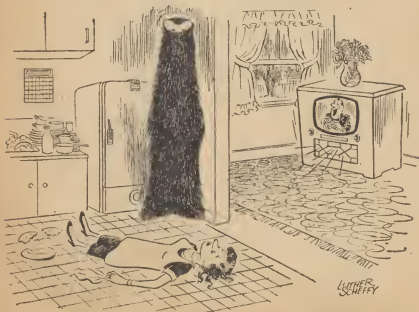
by JAN HUNTER

The recent striking of an American woman by a meteorite, resulted in a rash of assertions by hundreds of people that they too were victims of this "menace from space." But that's been happening for hundreds of years. The truth is of course, that until this event, there has been no authenticated instance of a human being struck by a meteorite. Even the devastating Siberian meteorite of the last century is not known to have caused

any deaths.

The chances of being struck by a meteorite are remote. A scientist computed that chance at something like one out of a hundred million! Still this woman was struck!

Considering the delicate balance between numbers of meteorites and their sizes—which determines their destruction by friction in the atmosphere—it is apparently striking that more damage hasn't been done by these outer-space visitors.



"Ladies, has dishwashing become a nightmare in your home?"



Postulate a society where boys are born in twenty-to-one ratio over girls; changes in moral and social laws would be inevitable. It was so in Clark's city, a metropolis of angry men. Women? You might find one by crossing—

Over The River...

by

Daniel F. Galouye

CHAPTER I

THE SCREW DRIVER slipped off the the face of the screw and its blade skittered

across the chassis, ripping through two circuits and shattering a tube.

Clark Thompson swore disgustedly at the paucity of workers that turned power-plant superintendents



into solder monkeys. He wiped perspiration from his brow, retrieving the tool.

"I said," the typist from the office repeated, "are you doing anything tonight?"

Again, Clark pretended he hadn't heard.

It was an unreasonable location for a rectifier panel—squeezed in behind a row of long-dead machines that once chattered noisily in printing market quotations—whatever those were. As a matter of fact, the building itself was an awkward place to house the row of dynamos that squatted obtrusively on the circular floor of what was once a so-called stock exchange.

There was an insistent sigh behind him.

"I'd planned on staying home," Clark said finally.

"That's no fun. You stay home too much, boss. I thought we could have dinner, go dancing."

"Homework," Clark begged off with only a trace of superficial civility. "That reorganization committee report's due tomorrow."

"You're the chairman. Get one of the members to finish it. Any way, I hear the band at the Starlight is plenty good."

Art Felman, connecting leads at an adjacent panel, snickered.

Clark popped the screw driver forcefully down on the floor; stared in annoyance at the typist.

"Sorry, Hank," he clipped irritably. "I can't make it."

Hank Smithers shrugged, smiled. "Think it over," he persisted. "I'll call you at quitting time."

Hank was tall and broad-shouldered and cockily sure of himself. It was the latter quality, principally, that provoked the disfavor of the other men in the building.

After the typist had gone, Art stepped from behind the panel. "That's the third time this week, isn't it?"

Still angered, Clark nodded sharply. "I'd fire him if typists weren't so damned scarce."

"Don't make the mistake I did and take him up," Art advised seriously. "Or you'll find out that he's . . ."

He didn't finish the thought.

Clark started. "You mean . . .?" He, too, left the words unspoken.

Art nodded gravely. Then, shaking his head dourly, he returned to work.

At the supply window, Clark signed the invoice for a new tube. Waiting for the order to be filled, he stared out the window at the tall buildings that made the skyline a sawed edge of gray against blue.

In the shadowy street, an aged car rolled leisurely by, its driver not bothering to stop at intersections—not even when the red eye of a traffic light glowered at him.

It was a quiet city. Huge, but

silent. Less than a score of men was visible on the sidewalks below. Like ghosts from a more populated past, they strode in front of musty, vacant buildings with broken windows and crumbling masonry.

A city that once served three million. Now it existed for the benefit of less than twenty thousand. Of a hundred skyscrapers in the central business district, only fifteen were in use. And an even higher ratio of vacancies prevailed among the smaller buildings.

The desolation was less appalling across the river, of course, where the women—both married and single ones—lived.

Clark checked himself mentally . . . Thinking about women again. When was the last time he had had his shot?

A tall, thin man strode excitedly down the hall.

"You're wanted on the videophone, boss," he announced anxiously. "It's the Mayoress!"

It was a videophone in, name only. Once the screen had lighted. But that was decades ago. Now videotechnicians were even scarcer than typists and only the audio worked on the sets.

"Thompson talking, Your Honor," he said into the microphone grill.

"The report," she said gruffly. "When will it be ready?"

He could picture her as a woman

of about forty-five, obese and irascible. That she had eight sons and a daughter and an entourage of seventy-six attendants, including thirty-eight personal guards on the rare occasions when she ventured across the river into the city proper, was common knowledge.

"I'll have it ready in the morning. The courier from Lanta was over a month late; that's what held us up."

"What will it recommend?"

Clark hesitated, not quite sure that the finding would meet with her approval. "That we adopt the worker-contender system to satisfy the necessities of social change."

HE MET ART at the entrance to the power-plant and they stepped onto the sidewalk as the noon trickle of workers headed for lunch.

"Art," he said thoughtfully. "Ever think about—getting married?"

The other stopped and looked stringently at him. "You're joking, of course."

"No, It's normal, you know. They say—"

"Look," Art exclaimed patiently. "I have nine brothers; you have seven. None of them has ever been married. And—"

A siren's wail interrupted, reverberating hollowly along the desolate side streets. The city's motor-

cycle turned into view on Main Street and headed toward them.

A loose formation of marchers—perhaps fifteen men in all—followed the traffic patrolman. Behind, a convertible of ancient vintage turned onto the thoroughfare, followed by another formation of men—some sixty or seventy.

Other men darted from buildings, pausing to stare at the parade, then racing toward it.

"A girl!" someone shouted, standing hesitantly in the doorway of a cafe. "She's announcing"

Clark listened to the sound of china breaking in the establishment and watched a stream of men racing from the building to line the sidewalk.

The siren shrieked more excitedly, attacking the loneliness of the city, and flushing a bevy of pigeons from their perch on the ledge of a building. The parade gathered speed as the birds fluttered low over the heads of the marchers. The men bringing up the rear broke into lusty song.

Art chuckled. "This ought to be the massacre of the decade. She must be terrific."

Two men in front of the car carried a banner. It read, in capital letters, "ANNOUNCING." In smaller letters was the name, "Beatrice Darton."

Clark strained to make out the features of the girl who sat atop the

rear seat. But at the distance, he could discern only that she was a brunette with long hair.

"Imagine someone like you or me in an arena with that mob!" Art pointed to the singing, shouting men.

"Ought to be a good show," Clark admitted.

"Damned if she *isn't* terrific!" the other exclaimed, stepping into the street so he could see better.

"Careful," Clark cautioned, smiling. "You might find yourself contending."

"Hell no. If I ever get the urge I'm going to pick the haggiest one that comes along—after I save up enough money to bribe off the other tourneyemen."

The motorcycle was almost abreast of them now and the convertible was less than a hundred feet away. She *was* terrific, Clark conceded. Tall and proud, she surveyed the spectators through brilliant, warm eyes and with an inviting, almost friendly smile.

Clark stiffened as the convertible drew to a stop in front of them and the girl stared interestedly down at him. She beckoned with a finger.

Gingerly, he went forward, glancing back uncertainly at Art.

"I'm announcing," she whispered suggestively.

He nodded uncomfortably, glancing behind him once more.

"Don't you want to enter the

tournament?"

Clark moistened his dry lips as he felt Art's hand grasp his sleeve to pull him back.

"We're—utility workers," Art explained uneasily.

The girl laughed, still staring at Clark. "You seem quite strong. You'd have a chance."

Clark glanced at the corps of men behind the car. If there was a single physical attribute they possessed in common, it was size—assurance that the fatality rate would run high.

"I—I'm waiting for another announcement," he lied.

She stood up on the seat and placed her hands on her hips. She was extraordinarily beautiful, Clark thought.

"I understand," she nodded sarcastically. "It'll take a real champion." She looked back at the throng of contenders. "And apparently you aren't."

She signaled the traffic officer to proceed.

"Wait," Clark shouted.

Art caught his arm again. "Don't be a damned fool!"

She looked back down at him, a patient smile on her face.

Like Art, Clark too might have contended eventually. If ever he had decided to, he would have picked one of the least desirable women so his chances of success would be enhanced. And he would

have utilized the strategy of bribery to the extent of his financial ability. But he would have had to wait years before he could save enough money . . . Damned, he thought, if only he could remember whether he'd had that last shot!

"I'm contending," he said weakly.

The men to her rear, hearing, loosed an enthusiastic cheer.

He reached nervously into his pocket and handed her his duplicate identification card. She accepted it and dropped it into a box half filled with the cards of other contenders.

"You'll be notified," she said still smiling.

The parade moved on.

DESPONDENTLY, Clark traced inane designs on the film of moisture covering the outside of his glass. The orchestra—a drum, piano and four fiddles—was playing a frisky tune.

"Drink up, boss," Art urged. "I'm a couple ahead of you."

Clark drank. "Why'd you let me do it?" he asked sullenly.

"I warned you to be careful. You knew you didn't have your last shot."

With a sudden anxiety, Clark stared across the table. "You think I might have a chance?"

The other snorted. "You must have missed *two* shots! Look, boss

—do like I tell you: When the whistle blows, drop; just play dead long enough to get out alive.”

“But I *would* have *some kind* of a chance!”

Art pushed the drink into his hand. “Drink up. Cut loose. It’s on me. I’m blue-suiting it tonight. The next time I’ll brown-suit it and I’ll drink you broke.”

The cigarette boy and the waiter converged on the table simultaneously. Clark bought a pack of hand-rolls while Art ordered more drinks.

“Dance?” Art invited as the music started up.

Clark shook his head, staring off into the distance. Absently, he watched the couples weave between tables and out onto the floor, separating to form two opposing lines. The blue-suits faced the brown-suits and the rows shuffled toward each other, passing through and turning.

The drinks came and they sipped silently, Clark uninterestedly watching a couple at the far end of the floor. As the lines came together a third time, the brown suit grabbed the blue-suit and whirled him in an intimate two-step.

Suddenly the blue-suit wrenched loose and strode angrily across the floor toward the exit.

“Damned decadent city!” Clark mumbled, gripping his glass.

“What?” Art asked.

Clark had already had several

drinks and their cumulative effect was not a jaunty carelessness, but a sense of sober concern. He motioned toward the rejected brown-suit who was now staring with interest at a nearby table where another single brown-suit sat. The latter smiled and the other went over.

“Oh,” Art exclaimed, observing the incident.

“Decadent city,” Clark muttered again staring sulkily into his glass.

“Not decadent,” the other corrected. “Decadence implies retrogression. This is something new.”

“It’ll get worse,” Clark said somberly. “Much worse.”

Art stared questioningly at him.

“I drew up the report with economic factors in mind—not human reaction,” Clark went on. “If it goes into effect, the door’ll be wide open for all kinds of abra—abra—aberrations.” He didn’t think he had drunk enough to have tongue-control trouble.

“The recommendations are good,” Art disagreed. “Without them our economy will be all busted to hell in another five or ten years.”

“But we can’t divide men into two camps! We can’t have one group eligible to compete in the arena for a wife and the other qualified only as workers!”

Art dropped his elbows on the

table and leaned heavily on them. "I've been out of Cincy for a year. But, like I told you, the worker-contender system was functioning beautifully when I left. Otherwise I wouldn't have suggested it when you got the Mayoress' appointment."

"But Cincy's only one city."

"You found out it's working in five other cities, didn't you?"

"But it ruined three—three that aren't even lived in any more."

Art sighed. "What're you going to do? Tear up the report?"

"Can't," Clark clipped. "Committee's already voted it."

"Then," Art suggested, rising and handing his identification card to the waiter, "let's forget it. We just got time to make the late show at the Starlight."

Outside, after the bill had been debited against Art's municipal account, Clark found the drinks had dulled his perception sufficiently to put an exaggerated halo around the single neon light that was still functioning on Main Street. He laughed at the unexpected effect.

IN THE STARLIGHT, there was brass in the band and the music was correspondingly louder. The air was heavy with the pungent smoke of immature tobacco. Clark felt pleasantly lightheaded as he watched the chorusboy routine on the floor in front of the orches-

tra.

Wearing blue velvet tights and billowing white silk blouses, the dancers performed a final high kick and were awarded a burst of applause.

A tall, lean chorusboy came over and stood by Clark's table. "Buy me a drink, mister?"

"Beat it," Clark said.

"He's okay," Art assured, offering him a chair. "Name's Cedric. He's from Cincy too."

"Must have been an exodus," Clark observed dully, motioning the waiter over.

"A few of us pulled out," Art shrugged.

"How many do you suppose will leave *here* if the worker-contender plan goes in?"

"Not many." It was Cedric who answered. "You'll just get rid of the floaters."

The waiter came over and Art ordered.

Clark reared back, laughing. "You two must be floaters then."

"Guilty," said Cedric. "And I'll just float on from here when the plan goes in. Entertainers aren't really any help—just a drag on the economy."

"For a dancer you show a lot of interest in munischi—municipal affairs," observed Clark, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head to clear it. The alcohol and smoke fumes were having their effect. He

didn't feel revelrous, though. Just groggy.

"Not municipal affairs," said Cedric. "Human affairs."

Clark stared intently at him, trying to bring his face into focus. "Philosopher!" he said accusingly.

Unperturbed, the dancer went on. "I'm for a one-to-one ratio. And I don't give a damn who knows it."

Clark started, "One-to-one? What's that?"

Art seemed to be remaining studiously aloof of the conversation, staring at the temporarily vacated bandstand.

"You people over here are thoroughly indoctrinated," Cedric went on derisively. "You don't give a hoot whether the man-woman ratio is twenty-one-to-one or a hundred-to-one! Oh, you've been indoctrinated, all right! So much that you can't even see civilization collapsing under you!"

Clark gripped the edge of the table. "Misogynist!" he charged. "That's what you are! You ought to be reported!"

"Easy there," Art cautioned. "Every man to his own opinion. You yourself said it was a decadent city."

"But he's against the social order! He means one man, one woman!"

"Maybe I'm against the order too," Art suggested.

The revelation had a fleet sober-

ing effect. With a vague effort, Clark tried to re-evaluate his estimate of the electrician in the light of Art's until-now hidden sentiment.

The waiter brought the drinks while Cedric continued to stare at Clark. "There was a one-to-one ration only a few hundred years back," he went on. "People were pretty contented then."

"They say a few hundred years ago people fought wars—groups of cities against groups of cities!" Clark rejoined. "They starved! They fought and died!"

"Now we die without fighting," Cedric said bitterly. "Nice big sprawling cities and nobody to live in them."

Clark frowned in deep confusion. Why hadn't it occurred to him before that the city—the crumbling city—was too big for the population it contained? Wasn't it odd that all his life he should see but not be impressed by the deepening desolation and ruin?

"Fifty years ago," Cedric said, "there were almost three hundred thousand people living here. There are only twenty thousand now. In another fifty years we'll be lucky if there are still two thousand. But what else can happen? A score of men to every woman means only one couple out of every twenty-one persons available for reproduction. Nineteen dead weights."

Clark turned abruptly to Art.

"Let's go."

But Art grasped his arm. "In a couple of minutes."

Clark gagged on the drink, realizing a bit too late that he had reached his capacity. He looked misgivingly at Cedric, felt his indignation toward the dancer surge again. "You sure know a hell of a lot!"

The other laughed. "In Cincy we had some leakage in the indoctrination. You can't pull a kid away from his mother and father at seven and not expect him to come on to a few things on his own."

Clark rose. "Going home," he said to Art.

But Cedric caught his wrist. "How'd you like to win the tournament?"

He frowned down at the man. Then he smiled stupidly as the question brought an image of Beatrice Darton to his mind. It wasn't hard to remember her. She was the first woman he had spoken with since he had left the other side of the river as a child.

He ignored the pointless question, caught the edge of the table as he felt himself reeling, and sat down again. His head drooped over and fell on top of an outstretched arm.

Art came around the table and shook him. "Clark!"

Cedric watched with interest, flicking a cluster of ashes off his

silken sleeve. "He still with us?"

"Out."

"Just as well. That ought to be enough for a first session."

Why the crack about winning the tournament?"

"It wouldn't be a bad idea if he did, would it?"

"I thought he was fouling things up by contending."

"Not if he wins. There's a chance of some delay in our time table. If there is, it might be well to have someone on our side across the river."

CHAPTER II

THE WEAK disk of the sun was beginning to break through the haze that hugged the river as Clark grasped the ferry rail and strained his eyes to see the shoreline.

A ghost hulk solidified through the fog and became another ferry that passed in the other direction, its rails crowded with seven-year-olds eager for their entry into the schooling institution on the west side.

The rush of water past the bow was a visual irritant that made Clark more conscious of the throbbing headaches, the restless void in his stomach.

A burly guard with an eyepatch and a huge scar across his cheek—evidence of a failing effort in the arena—came to stand beside

him. "So you're the guy who's carrying the report? Hear tell there's something special going to be cooked up for contenders."

"Segregation." Separate maintenance."

"No work?"

The ferry docked and a fifty-year-old sedan that was a composite of at least three different makes of automobiles pulled up on the dock. It ran on tireless rims and its engine, exposed in the absence of a hood, chugged a steady throbbing complaint.

"Only guard duty," Clark answered the guard as they crossed the swaying gangplank.

"Where will the contenders stay?" The guard motioned with his club. "Over this way. The car will take you to the Mayoress."

"We'll reclaim the Wilton and Markham hotels."

"Good. Maybe it'll keep us away from them damned homos."

Three other guards waited in the car. They drove off in a noisy chatter of steel on broken concrete.

Away from the levees, the air was clear and warm under a steady sun. The buildings on this side of the river, a residential section, were in a remarkable state of repair compared with the derelict structures on the west side.

The four steel rims ground to a halt in front of a large brick home in a neighborhood that was quite

deserted in the early morning hour. Only one of the guards accompanied Clark to the porch. He dropped into a chair, rolled a cigarette in brown wrapping paper, and made it obvious that Clark was on his own.

But before he could knock, the door opened.

"I've been waiting for you," a familiar voice said condescendingly.

He looked up into the face of Beatrice Darton.

"You—" he said unbelievably. "You're the Mayoress?"

"Not yet." She let him in and led him down the hall into an office. "Takes time—even after you qualify by attracting more contenders than the Mayoress did in her day."

The effusive smile that she had shown in the parade was gone. In its place was a sedate stiffness of features that, while not detracting from her beauty, presented her in an entirely different character.

"And the title won't be Mayoress," she added. "It will be 'Queen'."

"Queen?"

Beatrice smiled briefly. "The title won't be inappropriate—not with the males being divided into workers and contenders . . . just like workers and drones. Get it? It was my idea. Agatha liked it. She was amused when she realized I would be Queen Bea."

She motioned him into a chair

beside the desk.

The door opened and Clark turned, expecting to see the Mayor-ess entering. But, instead, it was a small, thin man, half bald and wearing slippers.

His eyes darted uncertainly from Clark to Beatrice several times; finally anchored on the girl. "Agatha wanted to know if he was here yet."

"Can't you see he's here?" she snapped.

He shrank another inch and backed out the door. But her stare held him. "Does Agatha let you bust in without knocking?"

He shook his head rapidly, a respectful fear in his eyes.

"Then," Beatrice reprimanded, crossing the room, "don't try it with me!"

Clark visualized the little man wincing in the hall as the door slammed in his face.

"He's not a—guard, is he?"

"He's Mister Agatha. Now, about this report—"

THE DOOR opened again and this time it was Agatha. She was as he had imagined she would be—perhaps even stouter and more muscular. Sensing that an expression of fealty was in order, he rose.

"Leave us, child," she instructed Beatrice as she crossed to the desk and dropped into the chair with a tired sigh.

After the girl had gone, she stared at him. "Your committee favors segregation?"

He nodded, wondering whether she would allow him to reclaim his chair. She didn't. He took the report from his briefcase and offered it to her.

She flopped it on the desk. "I'll read it later. What's in it? How will you divide the men?"

"We'll do it on a physical basis. The best qualified physically will become authorized contenders. That will insure that only the healthiest will enter the arena. As a result, over the generations, we'll also be improving the city genetically."

She smiled. "Then there won't be any chance of an occasional—runt winning his way through the tournament accidentally."

He thought of Mister Agatha and was fairly certain that she was thinking of him too—in a different light, of course.

"Will the new system help out with the problem of workers?" the Mayoress asked.

"The working force is constantly depleted as a result of the tournament—both the utility workers and the foundrymen. That won't happen any more. We'll have a stable laborers' pool."

The sound of children at play outside attracted his attention to the window. The adjoining lot seemed to be a recreation area, with

its exercise and games equipment. Three girls were playing in the center of the square, engaged in a game that sent them scurrying about gleefully. In one corner, some fifty or sixty boys were seated on the ground, watching enviously.

"Of course," the Mayoress said, "we'll begin the separation process with the children."

"Yes, Your Honor. In the pre-school stage if possible."

"Even before they're ready to go across the river we'll start. By the time they're transported, we'll have records on their health and probable development. The two groups will be quartered separately."

Outside, Beatrice appeared on the play scene and the girls crowded around her. But she stared at one of the smaller boys who was crying.

Mayoress Agatha rose; put the report in a drawer. "I'll study the recommendations. If I decide they're feasible, I'll get out an order."

It meant the interview was over. Clark rose and closed his briefcase, watching Beatrice cross the lot and kneel beside the sobbing boy. She straightened his hair and wiped his cheeks with her fingertips. When she turned, holding the three-year-old in her arms, the smile that had prompted Clark's entry into the tournament, was back on her face. And, he told himself again, she was incredibly

beautiful.

"Thompson," Agatha called as he reached the door. "In case of resistance to the plan, I'll assign more guards when we put it in effect."

"SO I'M quitting," the lineman said, standing stiffly in front of Clark's desk.

So much had happened last night and during the morning. There had been the incident involving Art and the chorusboy who apparently was his friend. Clark couldn't remember it too clearly, so he was anxious to speak with Art and have his dancer friend's philosophical outpourings clarified. But half the day had gone by and still Art hadn't reported to work.

"Quitting!" Clark repeated; suddenly aware of the lineman. "Go on back to work, Stan."

"No, I mean it. You see, this lamp is a coming thing." He nodded toward the object he had placed on the desk when he had entered. "It was the only one like it. I found it in the museum. It'll be easy to produce thousands like this one—from a pile of cans I found in a wrecked warehouse."

"What's it for?"

"Light. It'll make light a lot cheaper than we can make it. It uses oil. There are a thousand places to get used oil."

"Good God, man!" Clark grimaced. "We're generating electricity

here for lighting purposes. Now you want—"

"Sure," Stan agreed, grinning sarcastically. "But for how long? Anyway, since that bridge upstate washed out we're not getting any light bulbs any more. Hasn't been a gasoline barge here in almost two months either."

He took his lamp and headed for the door.

"But, Stan—you're supposed to start pulling poles down in the Second and Third District so we'll have line for repairs in District Five!"

Stan walked out without even looking around.

Clark sat down again, thoughtfully. Hadn't this Cedric said something about a collapsing civilization? Tearing down two districts to repair one; manufacturing lamps to replace electric lights—punctuating incidents that he might not have given second thought to before last night.

Outside, an automobile—stripped down to its frame, four wheels and front seat—rolled slowly down the street, hitched to a team of cows.

"Smithers," he shouted through the doorway.

Hank came in, smiling anxiously. "Tonight, boss?"

"No. Type out another copy of the citizens report. I'll need it if the Quee—ah, Mayorees decides to use it."

"She likes it? She's going to do what you say?" Hank was grinning now.

Clark looked up at him deprecatingly.

"It's good stuff," Hank continued. "Segregate the workers and contenders—that's the logical thing to do. Then we won't have to worry about our people going off to fight and get married—the workers I mean."

"Rush up that copy," Clark said impatiently.

"There's some workers out here. They want to see you—about the report. They don't like it. But don't listen to them, boss. You got the right idea."

Hank left and several seconds later three men walked in. The first a timorous individual who was a full head shorter than Clark, seemed to be the spokesman.

"Anson Howard," he announced himself. "Toolmaker First Class. . . Is it true that there's going to be two classes?"

Clark rose. "It's up to the Mayoreess."

"We don't want it," one of the other men declared. Clark recognized him as a training school instructor.

"I thought it was a good plan," Clark stared stubbornly at them.

"But," Anson protested pleadingly, "that'll mean I can't ever get a wife!"

Clark suppressed a smile. He tried to picture the dumpy little man in savage conflict in the arena.

"Me neither," said the third man. "None of us will ever be able to contend. It ain't fair."

"Any of you planning to contend soon?" Clark asked slyly.

The three men looked at one another, said nothing.

"Damned utility worker!" one of them rasped almost under his breath.

"Segregationist!" murmured another scornfully.

"It's out of my hands," Clark sighed. "The committee recommended what's best for the city economically."

"The hell with economy!" Anson exhibited an aggressiveness that Clark hadn't thought he possessed. "You can't put it over on us. We won't let you."

"Look, boys. I'm one of you. The only difference between us is that I work in utilities so the city'll stay in one piece and you work in the foundry so we'll have tools to trade for necessities from other areas. I don't want to make any enemies just because the Mayoress needed a scapegoat to head a committee."

"You'll make 'em all right!" Anson warned, leading the other two out.

CLARK SHRUGGED, returned to the work on his desk.

"All through?"

He looked up, saw Art standing in the doorway leisurely waving a sheet of mimeographed paper. He came in slowly.

"If you're not happy," he smiled, "maybe this'll spread some cheer."

He handed over the copy of the Weekly Bulletin. The pencil-thin headline read, "BEATRICE DARTON TOURNEY STARTS FRIDAY." A smaller headline said, "NEW MAYORESS QUALIFIES."

"If you win," Art offered, "you get the whole works."

Impulsively, Clark drew erect; clenched his fists; tightened his biceps and pulled in his stomach. He wondered briefly whether four days training would do any good.

"I want to know more about last night," he said suddenly. "This Cedric—"

"Interesting character," Art observed.

"There was a seditionists' trial when I was a kid. Two men were executed; seven banished, even despite the fact they were in a critical category."

"Bully for them."

Clark looked at him disgustedly. "I should have known when you came here last year that there was something wrong with you. Good electricians don't just pop up for no reason. . . . What's behind it?"

"You remember anything Cedric

said about a one-to-one ratio?"

"He meant one man, one woman, didn't he?"

Art nodded.

"What's his angle?" Clark demanded.

"Why don't we just look at last night as an introductory session? Things like this take time. Maybe you'll hear more if you are patient."

"Quit being so damned cryptic."

"We're going to help you win the tournament."

"Why?"

"When you're ready to know, we'll tell you. First you've got to digest some more—radical ideas . . . digest them, not vomit them up."

Suppose they could help him win? Then he wouldn't be concerned any longer with plans and systems and shortages and sedition. He'd be Mister Beatrice then. Clark smiled inwardly. Maybe it'd be better not to act too hastily until he found out more about Art and Cedric and what they could do.

"You got time for a trip?" Art asked. "We want to show you something out in the country."

CHAPTER III

BEATRICE sat in the large chair in Agatha's office, her legs drawn up under her.

"Actually," the Mayoress said,

her back to the girl as she stared out the window, "there's nothing to governing. Take care of the women, and the men will take care of themselves. They're a hardy lot."

They *were* a hardy lot, Beatrice agreed silently. Clark, for instance, was rugged and handsome and his very bearing seemed to hold forth the promise that he could take care of himself.

"Occasionally," Agatha went on, "you'll find a woman malignantly obsessed with the idea of having a girl when she isn't authorized to. Usually a good lecture will straighten her out. Invariably, the threat of banishment does the trick."

But, would he be able to survive a tournament? And, if he did, what scars would it leave? Introspectively, she considered her behavior when he had been in the office earlier in the day. She had wanted to break her icy aloofness and wish him luck in the arena.

But custom demanded that she maintain unimpeachable dignity in the presence of masculinity. And, a fine ruler she would make if she started off by kicking over the traces!

"Everything will take care of itself," Agatha said, turning to face her, "if you maintain an average twenty-one-to-one ratio in authorizing preconceptual sex determining efforts. At times you will have to

be stubbornly insistent. In your administration, you may even find a woman who will want to have several girls. It happen occasionally."

Beatrice started, then looked up quickly to see if Agatha had noticed her reaction. She hadn't. The impulsive half-gasp had its origin in the realization that, at times, Beatrice had found herself wondering whether she would be lucky enough to be selected to have the one girl allowed every three women—even wondering whether *she* might not be able to find some way of having *more* than one girl.

Agatha smiled. "Enough on theories of government for today . . . Have you notified all your contenders of the tournament details?"

"All the letters have been sent."

Again Beatrice looked guiltily at the Mayoress. What if Agatha should find out that she had practically invited Clark to contend? Would she disqualify all the contenders on the grounds that she had recruited them in an insidious attempt to win the mayoralty?

WHERE THE skyscrapers ended, the country began, with its geometrically arranged stands of pines blocked into squares bounded by strips of concrete.

The trees reared up young and straight from a forest floor spotted with regularly spaced concrete blocks. But the houses the blocks

supported had long ago been dismantled so that their material could be used for repairs in other suburban areas.

The skyscrapers, like timeless sentinels, stood as they had for the past several hundred years—their very size a challenge rejected by the men who had generations ago dismantled the smaller buildings clustered about them.

The steel rims of the carriage grated harshly on the pavement and the vehicle pitched jarringly each time the horse broke gait to bypass a single sapling poking up through an occasional crack in the concrete.

Cedric, seated in the center, drove. The billowing silk of his blouse whipped about his arms as they rode into the wind that was sweeping down the narrow lane.

Art; on the driver's left, stared ahead, a half-smile on his lips as he pleasantly surveyed the trees passing in review. He wore full-dress, the tails wrapped around his thighs and resting in his lap.

Clark, on the other side of Cedric, would have thought the formal attire comical had he not been used to shortages and the sometimes drastic substitutions which had to be imposed to circumvent them. Now, it was working clothes. But the full-dress substitute, thousands of them, had been discovered in vacuum-packed containers in an

underground storage depot.

Clark wore tan denims, thankful for his double allotment on the basis of his supervisory status.

"How much far-THER?" he asked, his voice exploding as the wheels clanked over a separation in the pavement.

"We turn up ahead at Eighteenth Street," Art answered. "Then two blocks over to Floringham Avenue and three blocks on Floringham."

Behind, in the vista between the bracket of pines, only the top of the tallest building in the city was visible. They must have come for miles—and for what?

"Let's turn around. I can't stay away from the powerhouse this long."

"I think you'll be interested in seeing what we have to show you," Cedric promised.

Clark folded his arms. "Secrecy!" he grumped. "I know I'm breaking the law, and yet I go along with it."

Art stared at him. "You won't regret it, boss. This is something big—bigger than you'll ever run across."

"I'm just a damned fool," Clark growled. "You knew what you wanted even before you came to work for me, didn't you?"

"Right."

At least, Art was being immoderately candid, Clark thought.

"I knew it was you I had to get

close to," the other continued, "when you were named chairman of the worker-contender study committee. You see, we wanted that report to come out the way it did. We want the plan to go into effect."

"That's a lie!" Clark accused. "You put the plan in my ear over the past year by telling me how well it worked in other cities. But all the while you despised the plan, isn't that right?"

Art looked sincerely at him. "We'll discuss that later. First, before we try any arguing on you, we want you to be hit with the full impact of what you're going to see."

But Clark continued to pursue Art's paradoxical regard for the worker-contender plan. "I know you're against the new system. You were in Cintcy when it went in there, yet you left rather than stay and become a part of it. Why?"

"I'll say this much," Art admitted ambiguously, "we're for the plan for what it will do. But we *don't* want to see it go into effect."

Clark swore in frustration. "I know this all must be about one-to-one and equal rights and a sister for every brother—all that sort of stuff. Something that can only get me banishment or something worse."

"Trouble with you," Cedric observed, "is that your viewpoint is clouded. We're just trying to blow

away some of the mist . . . You've known Art a whole year and liked him. But, now that you find out he's tricked you, even though it might be something for your own good, you're ready to stomp him down."

THEY HAD turned at Eighteenth Street (Clark took their word for it, since there were no street markers) and gone two blocks before swinging onto Floringham Avenue. Now Cedric was pulling up at the curb in front of a single house—one side fully bricked, the other half patched with clay-cemented logs.

The pine trees were pushed back in all directions from the house to the broad strips of concrete that bounded the square. But the centuries-old foundation blocks remained in the field—a sorrowful army of silent, forgotten soldiers who had stood at attention so long that they had lost sight of their purpose. They guarded rows of cultivated soil that wended their way between the cement structures and sprouted their crops of corn and tomatoes and beans.

Cedric tethered the horse to a rusty, broken fireplug as a man came around the side of the house and shouted a warm greeting.

As he approached, Clark saw he was wearing home-woven overalls. He wasn't an old farmer—perhaps

forty or forty-five. But his face was rough and darkened from constant exposure to the sun.

Art leaped from the carriage and the farmer came over to shake his hand. But he saw Clark and scowled, muttering an oath that was not quite below his breath.

"Stranger!" he called back over his shoulder.

There was a scurrying about inside the house.

"What's the idea?" the farmer demanded, nodding toward Clark.

"He's the head of that committee," Art explained.

The farmer swore again. "You brought *him* out *here*?"

"Things took a turn. Yesterday he got himself involved in a tournament."

"So?"

"If he wins, we got a man on the inside—if we can sign him up." Belatedly, Art got around to the introduction. "Clark, this is Jason . . . Jason, Clark."

But Jason ignored the amenity. "Get him away," he scowled. "I don't want him here."

Cedric finished tying the horse, came over. "We brought him here to show him."

"You're crazy!" Jason protested. "You just said you're trying to win him over. You mean he isn't even with us yet and you want to *show him*?" He tossed his head sideways again. "Stranger! Stranger!" he

shouted at the house.

"If he sees," Art persisted, "he'll be convinced. If he doesn't come around to our way, he'll forget what he saw."

"Ain't none of 'em willing to forget."

Cedric turned to Clark. "We're trying to show you something you're not supposed to see. Jason wants your word that if you don't like it, you won't say anything to anybody."

Clark glanced misgivingly at the dancer, then at Art who was removing his full-dress coat and folding it over his arm. "Come on, Clark," he prompted. "You've come this far. Anyway, if we get caught doing something illegal, we *could* make trouble for you by proving that you've been in with us."

Clark grunted his assent.

Reluctantly, the farmer led them toward the house. "It's all right," he shouted ahead.

Three small boys came sheepishly out on the porch. The four men reached the house and Clark stood staring at the children, also dressed in home-woven one-piece garments.

That there could be three preschool age children on this side of the river was a point of astonishment for Clark. But when he looked closer, he swore incredulously. *They were all girls!*

Mystified, he looked at Art and

Cedric; realized they and the farmer were studying his reaction.

The door opened again and another farmer came out, removed a wide-brim hat. Long, blonde hair cascaded down. *It was a woman!*

The idea struck him with stupefying impact. "One-and-one!" he gasped.

"One-to-one," Art acknowledged. "And for every brother a sister. Only, here its three sisters and no brothers. Nature has taken its course . . . Clark, this is Audrey. This is Mrs. Jason Random . . . Note that Jason *is not* Mister Audrey."

The woman looked uncertainly at the stranger, than back at the door. It was obvious that subtle fears were suggesting the inside of the house as a sanctuary. But she remained.

Jason mounted the step; stood beside the woman. He dismissed the children. "Back inside with you before someone else from the city comes along." He turned to Audrey. "Back on with your hat."

Finally, the numbness left Clark. "But—but where did she come from? How—?"

"Out here," Cedric interrupted, "the farmers—some of them—are building a new life for themselves and the world. They know that the old one can't last much longer; that soon the cities will be gone."

"Gone?" Clark repeated densely,

wondering at the immensity of the traitorous act that Art and Cedric and the farmers were plotting.

"Dammit!" Art swore. "Can't you see it going now. From planes and automobiles back to horses and buggies. From telegraph and wireless to courier. From electric lights to oil lamps. Hasn't the trend sunk in with any of you? Or, can't you see beyond tomorrow into the next generation?"

Confounded, Clark fell back before the fierce determination that was hurled at him with the words. He was thinking of planes. There were planes at one time. Once, when he was a boy, he had watched one land in a field on the south side of the city. But that was the only one he could ever remember seeing. Odd how he had forgotten all about them since then.

CEDERIC NUDGED Art out of the way; stood before Clark. "Do you know why the old life is going, Clark?"

He shook his head, still staring at the woman.

"It's all mathematical," Cedric went on, gesturing in a flash of silken sleeve. "The population of the city is down to about eighteen or twenty thousand. Why?—If out of every three marriages only one girl is born, compared with some twenty boys, you cut down the population in the subse-

quent generation to a third of what it is now. Figure it out yourself . . . by the time you're an old man, there'll be only about three thousand people here."

Art took up the argument. "But the farmers—some of them, at least—are getting things back on an even keel."

"One-to-one," Clark mumbled, trying to grasp all the ramifications of such an arrangement. He nodded toward Audrey and addressed Art, "Where did she come from?"

"She's a second-generation free-woman. Her mother was kidnaped from a city a few hundred miles away. That was when we had about four times as many cities as we do now. She was brought to this section; learned to accept one-to-one. Audrey has three sisters and two brothers in the area. All three of the sisters live in a one-one world."

Like convicted criminals standing to hear their sentence, Jason and his wife had been listening to the conversation.

"Doesn't look to me like you're going to convince him of anything," Jason said sullenly.

Clark studied the woman. "Do you know what you're doing?" he asked. "Do you know there are other women who live—differently?"

She nodded without looking at

him. "I know all about across the river."

"Do you know that women are entitled to whatever they want?"

"I only want to work the farm with Jason."

"And hide with your children every time a stranger comes around?"

"If I didn't hide, they wouldn't let me stay with my husband."

"You—like your husband?"

"Mister, I'd cut my heart out for him."

Clark reeled under the impact of the new concepts. One-and-one in practice. A man on an equal footing with a woman. Three girls without the more than sixty boys that would be necessary to preserve the ratio. Why hadn't he at least *conceived* of such an arrangement before?

He sat on the stoop, conscious of Cedric's silent stare. The dancer was giving him the opportunity to think. But there was no order in his thoughts.

Art smiled. "Consider yourself qualified to take indoctrination step number three." He slapped Clark goodnaturedly on the back. "It'll be a lot of fiery gab. And you'll be entirely on the listening end."

They walked toward the wagon.

"Keep everything ready," Cedric shouted back to Jason as he untethered the horse. "Tell the boy it

may be any time now."

His arm around Audrey's waist, Jason watched the three men drive off, the tails of Art's full-dress coat joggling as they dangled over the back of the seat.

"I'm worried," Audrey said. "This is the first time anything like this has happened."

He squeezed her tighter. "Art says he's okay. It'll be all right. Art'll convince him."

"Why's he so important?"

"He's the one who made the report. And he's contending. If he wins . . . well, with him across the river we may get a second chance if our first move goes wrong. Look at it this way—he's security in case we have to make long range plans."

"But—"

"Forget it, honey. Remember how we worried so much about Art and Cedric a year ago when they spied on you from the forest—until they laughed and said a lot of farmers were taking wives? At first we thought they were guards."

"Then we found out what they really were." She smiled up at him. The frown, however, returned almost immediately. "But suppose he wins the tournament and tells Art the hell with us; that he's going to go across the river and stay there?"

CHAPTER IV

THERE WERE almost two score men crowded into what,

until a generation ago, had been the barber shop in the basement of the Washington hotel. But the new generation had not produced a barber and the room had been turned into a recreational facility while the tonsorial phase of man's vanity had retired to the privacy of his room.

Anson, still smarting from the rebuff in Clark Thompson's office earlier in the day, was speaking. He stood on a bench so he could see all of the men. The late afternoon sun flared in obliquely through the high window, making grim shadows out of the lines of determination on his face.

"We don't have to know the details of the segregation plan," he said, "to decide that we won't put up with it. But if it's details you want, I'll let Rod Lorry give them to you. He is a member of Thompson's committee. Represents the toolmakers."

A lean man mounted the bench. "I was on the committee," he admitted, "but I told them it'd never work. I warned them there'd be—this kind of trouble."

"What are they going to do with us?" someone shouted.

"They're going to line you up and say, 'You're a worker'," he pointed indiscriminately at one of the men, then at another. "And, 'You're a contender'. Then all the workers are going to go back to their jobs while the contenders

move into better quarters and play games and exercise to keep in condition. Whenever a girl announces, the professional contenders will be the only ones to enter the tournament."

"It ain't fair!" snapped someone protestingly.

"Exactly!" Rod slapped his hand into his palm. "Won't none of us ever be allowed to get into the arena!"

"What are we going to do about it?" a man close to the front of the room asked despairingly.

"Revolt!" came an anonymous answer.

"Against *the women*?"

Anson held up his arms. "Revolt won't work, even if we decide on it. The regular tournament contenders want the new system. They're even more loyal to the Mayoress than we are. They'd join the guards and go against us. We wouldn't have a chance."

He turned to Rod. "What happened in the other cities?"

"The plan went over in five. It didn't go over in three. In two of those three, the workers revolted."

"Against their Mayoress?" Anson asked, shocked.

Rod nodded. "They were desperately against the system. It busted up those two cities. There weren't enough able-bodied workers left to keep things going. The Mayoress in both cases had to abandon

the cities. In the third city, the workers just deserted. That busted up the city too."

"Then we have our choice of swallowing the plan or self-exile?" someone asked.

"If you want my idea," Rod said. "I make a motion that we—"

Anson stopped him. "The few of us who are here aren't qualified to decide for all who will be affected. First we have to find out how many are with us. Then we have to see what the majority is willing to do."

"But it has to be done quietly," Rod cautioned. "The report showed that in all the cities where the plan was considered, the guards expected trouble and were prepared to meet it."

Nobody saw a tall, broad-shouldered man slip silently from the room. Hank Smithers went unnoticed as he quietly closed the door behind him.

THE STARLIGHT wasn't yet open for business, but Cedric, being employed there, enjoyed special privileges. On the strength of this concession, he was able to gain entry for Art and Clark; mix drinks for them, and turn right-side-up three chairs around a table in one of the corners. The twilight entering through the single window was dim, so he lighted the candle on the table.

"Of course we tricked you," Art

admitted candidly. "And you'd never have known about the deception if you hadn't gotten yourself mixed up in that tournament. But if we plant somebody on the other side of the river, we'll have arranged for every possible setback."

"You tricked me into accepting a segregation plan that I probably would have discarded," Clark accused. Then, confused, he added, "But now that it's ready to go into effect, you admit you're against it. Why?"

Cedric laughed. "If you want people to spit out something, the best way to get them to do it is to try to cram it down their throats."

Clark frowned. "You're—playing both ends?"

Art nodded. "And you ran into the other end this afternoon—Anson Howard. You see there the other half of the plan working, the resistance."

"You worked on Anson too?"

"Not me. Cedric."

"But why are you pushing the segregation plan and fighting it at the same time?"

Art leaned back in his chair, "What do you think of Jason and Audrey?"

Clark didn't answer.

"They're a nice couple . . . Did you ever think there'd be a system in which a woman was as devoted to a man as a man was to a woman?"

Clark tried to imagine himself and Beatrice in the place of the farmer and his wife. He tried to picture Agatha and Mister Agatha in the same circumstances. It was almost beyond conception.

"That's the way it *should* be, you know," Cedric offered. "That's the way it *will* be another hundred years—after this twenty-one-to-one fiasco completes destroying civilization, after humans become animals again. But we can't wait that long. As a civilization deteriorates, its potential to rebuild diminishes. Knowledge is lost. The likelihood of regaining knowledge is lost. There's a certain point—and only one point—at which one-to-one can return with a fairly good chance of not being swatted down, and at the same time be able to pick up some of the loose ends of technology and start rebuilding. If we wait until that point is passed, one-to-one may eventually return anyway. But the deterioration of civilization will have had too much of a start. We're *at* that point now!"

He rose, took the empty glasses and went back to the bar to refill them.

"You *want* the workers to revolt against the new system," Clark said in a sudden flash of understanding. "so that the city will be busted up—like Troit and Sanlou and Chi!"

Art nodded gravely. "When it

does—either through revolt or desertion of workers — there'll be general confusion."

"Then—?"

"Then across the river'll be wide open for a raid."

"Who's going to raid what? And what for?"

"You met one farmer. There are others—aware of and sympathetic to one-one but unable to participate in it."

"You mean they're going to *kidnap women*?"

"Women. Young ones, unmarried ones. Girls too. We figure there are three or four hundred across the river between six and twenty years old—not all marriageable now, of course. But they will be, given time."

It was a fantastic plan, Clark thought . . . Taking girls—*by force!*

"Sure, it's the craziest thing you've ever heard of." Art smiled, sensing his reaction. "But the point of possibly successful change is on us now. The knowledge that has been preserved despite the catastrophe can still be rebuilt. And, more important— there won't be any interference."

Cedric returned and placed drinks before them. He nodded in agreement. "No interference. Twenty-five years ago, there was no hope of a return to one-one. There was still inter-city organiza-

tion. There were still communications. If a Mayoress ran into a situation she couldn't handle, she had only to call for help from another city."

"But, fortunately," Art added, leaning back in the chair, "someone about a hundred years ago didn't foresee that roads and highways would eventually begin deteriorating too. The art of road repair and building has been lost. With it has gone inter-city organization. And now commerce is disappearing . . . Your fuel tanks for the generators are almost dry and you're desperately waiting for land carriers to bring more oil. But they won't come. We're almost out of supplies for tool manufacturing. We've stock-piled three months' production because no carriers have come to take the output off our hands. Soon there'll be general unemployment and we'll be a totally isolated village."

IN SILENCE, Art and Cedric sipped their drinks while Clark stared down at the table.

"With us?" Art asked suddenly.

"Hell, so far you've done all right without me. Doesn't seem to be anything I can add to the effort."

"Except complications, perhaps," said Cedric, "by warning the Mayoress that the revolt will be only a cover-up for the raid."

"If you'd kept your mouth shut

I wouldn't be able to warn her of anything," Clark reminded.

"But it seems," Art said, leaning eagerly across the table, "that you've placed yourself in the position of being able to help us further . . . across the river."

"What can I do there?"

"Either the workers are going to revolt, or desert. If they revolt, we'll be ready for our raid. If they desert—well, we'll have to wait until the women find out that the depleted city can't continue supporting them. They'll eventually have to flee to asylum in another city. If you're on the inside, you'll know the details of their withdrawal—the time and direction. We'll be able to deploy our raiding force more effectively."

Clark was thoughtfully silent a moment. Then, "What'll I get out of this?"

Cedric swore disgustedly. "A world falling down around your head and you want to know what's in it for you!"

Clark looked away, embarrassed. "I don't imagine the women will be particularly disposed to the idea of living in a one-to-one world."

"There won't be very much they can do about it after they are captured. It won't take them long to get used to one-one."

Clark's thoughts went back to Jason and Audrey. It would be inadequate to say he was astonished

at the mutual devotion with which the couple regarded each other. Previously, he hadn't even conceived of mutuality between the sexes. The relationship was most rigidly unilateral.

"How do you get me across the river?" His altered tone signified capitulation.

Cedric sighed and smiled.

Art slapped him on the back. "Leave that to us. We're not sure we can, but it's worth a try."

"And if you fail, I get my neck twisted like a pretzel by some fanatic who's hell bent for a wife."

"The decision to contend was your own," Cedric reminded. "We didn't have anything to do with that."

Art raised his glass. "To one-one," he said reverently.

Reluctantly, Clark joined the toast. When they had drunk, he asked, "How did we get to twenty-one-to-one? And how could that ratio seem so natural?"

"You were born into a system," the dancer explained. "When people inherit a way of life, they don't question it unless they get a clue from the outside. Naturally, the women themselves aren't going to hurl down the clue from their pinnacle."

"If it's a false system, how did it get started?"

Art settled back. "Principally psychological factors bred it, from

what we gathered from some old documents. First, they discovered how to predetermine the sex of a child by killing off all the female X-sperm at the time of conception and leaving only the male Y-sperm to—"

He stopped and glanced up abruptly at Clark. "But hell, you wouldn't know anything about X and Y sperm . . . At any rate, they could make nothing but boys be born if they wanted to. Oh, that went over big—something the world had been waiting for. Most people naturally wanted boys. Fathers love boys. Mothers too. They're more economically feasible. That's the way it usually is in a patriarchal society.

"Within a generation, the ratio had leaped to three-to-one. The method of determination was so simple that it became a matter of individual prerogative, a personal right—not even to be denied by a husband. No government could dictate against such an inalienable right. Furthermore, Country "A" wouldn't try to restore the normal ratio unless Country "B" also agreed to a return to the old system and thereby consent to a mutual reduction of manpower.

"All the while, women were becoming scarcer—more valuable. The switch was to a matriarchal basis. Women, the influential little creatures they were becoming, were

further honored by acclamation into offices and positions of political predominance."

Art paused and Cedric laughed.

"They didn't mind that at all," the dancer said. "They rather liked the attention; accepted their new positions of importance. Men, meanwhile, were too busy readjusting to the new society to do anything except accept their lot. And would the women betray their mothers and grandmothers by reversing the trend? Or would they pat themselves on the back with the observation that they'd already undermined national governments and made them incapable of aggression? Pat themselves on the back they did—with rededication to preserving the ratio, even increasing it. What they were enjoying, their daughters could enjoy only if they handed down the torch of the new order."

"I guess that somewhere along the line," Art offered, "they took notice of declining populations and set up some ridiculous population low to aim at, telling themselves it would be the optimum. But before they reached it, they got drunk in the ecstasies of their new role and lost sight of the goal."

"This isn't the first Dark Age," Art interjected scornfully. "But you wouldn't know anything about Dark Ages. You didn't have the benefit of a forgotten library, like

we did in Cincy."

HANK TIGHTENED his negligence about him and crossed over to the sofa, two drinks in his hands. Robes were out of stock; had been for more than a decade. He handed one of the glasses to a dark youth in pajamas, then sat beside him.

He laughed, slapping the other chidingly on the knee. "Everything'll turn out all right, Peter."

Peter's head drooped over his drink. "Not if they bust up the city like you say they're going to."

"They won't bust it up. We'll see to that." Hank raised the glass to his mouth and his rather large lips bulged corpulently around the rim.

Peter was young. Possibly sixteen or seventeen. He had been released from the schooling institution only a few weeks earlier to take his place in the city as a carpenter.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I can't do very much," Hank admitted. "The general population knows me and a lot of others would like to see the new plan go in so that workers we're—fond of won't get themselves maimed in the arena or go off across the river. If I showed up at one of their meetings, they'd know why I was there. But there's still a way to see that the Mayoress knows if and when there's going to be a revolt . . . You

haven't been around much, Peter. You can attend the meetings without arousing suspicion."

Hank walked over to the window and loosed the curtains, letting them fall in place. Two years ago they had evacuated the hotel-dormitory across the street. But he was still in the habit of providing privacy for himself.

"Why don't you report the whole thing to Mr. Thompson?" Peter asked. "*He* thought up the plan. He'd know what to do."

"To hell with Clark Thompson!" Hank exclaimed vehemently.

Peter started. "I thought you liked him?"

Hank swilled his drink. "He's contending." He said the words with a finality that suggested he didn't want to discuss the delicately personal matter further.

CHAPTER V

THE OPERA HOUSE was usually a desolate, ghost of a building, a hundred years having passed since it presented its last legitimate performance. Occasionally, however, it recaptured briefly its past luster and its once envied position as the cultural-entertainment mecca of the metropolitan area.

The night of the Beatrice Darton tournament preliminaries represented one of its rare resurgences. Outside, additional lights had been sup-

plied, by order of Mayoress Agatha, to draw the attention of the citizenry to the entertaining and significant events that were to transpire within.

Its interior, even more generously lighted than its facade, throbbed with a confusion of hundreds of hoarsely shouting voices.

The first twenty rows of the orchestra had been razed long ago and a platform had been elevated almost level with the stage and roped off. A battery of spotlights bathed the arena area from above.

Utility and civic workers occupied the remainder of the orchestra section. In the balconies were more workers—foundrymen. The loges were assigned to off-duty guards who, judging by the generally deserted appearance of the boxes, numbered few.

That the Opera House had seen its better days was mockingly demonstrated by the moonlight slanting down onto the unlighted section of the third balcony through an irregular gap in the curved roof.

The roped-off platform was empty now, and Art stared absently at it as he held an arm over the seat next to him to indicate that it was taken.

Cedric, in casual clothes, sidled past the knees of the other men in the row and dropped into the chair, setting a tray on the floor, edge-down, in front of him.

"Fine custom," he said above the the uproar. "Wine for the contenders."

"It does seem to give them a bit more vigor for the contest," Art agreed.

"Did I miss much in the last round?"

"You missed seeing eighteen men get pretty well banged up— just like in the first four bouts."

"Tonight's a rough one," Cedric observed. "Fighting's damned rugged with staffs. If ever I had to do it, I'd want to go barehanded."

"Agatha announced the finals Tuesday night are going to be barehanded."

"Who won the last round?"

"Guy by the name of Welsh. But he was disqualified and the second to last man standing was declared finalist. They think Welsh's skull is fractured and he won't be able to compete further . . . How's Clark?"

"He'll get by all right—if he can keep out of trouble for two or three minutes."

The full stage, almost as expansive as the Opera House's orchestra section, bore tiers of seats that rose almost to the rafters and stretched into either wing. These seats were occupied by the women. The bleachers-like section fanned out behind a double-throned arrangement flanked by scores of guards with their riot sticks.

Art watched Agatha, in one of the large, padded chairs, lean on an elbow to whisper to Beatrice, in the other. Then she rose and signaled for attention.

Respectfully, the audience quieted.

"Before we continue with the final bout," she announced. "I have been informed by the referee that fatalities thus far total eleven."

Thunderous applause rang out in the audience.

"Although it is a good tournament," she continued, "it is the last of its type. Those in the future will be more hotly contested. Tourney-men will be evenly pitched. Workers who are physically unqualified to compete will not be allowed in the arena. That is but one of the features of the worker-contender system that will go into effect Wednesday with the inauguration."

A murmur of discontent rippled through the spectators. Agatha scowled and the demonstration faded out as though on order.

"Adoption of the plan," she added, "is not only my decision. It is also the will of your next leader—Queen Beatrice. It is not to be questioned. You will be examined and assigned temporary status Monday. You will be segregated Wednesday."

She studied the audience carefully, squinting even into the lesser

gloom of the top balcony; listening. There was no disapprobating murmur this time. There was whispering though, some of which she could overhear.

"Yes, I—said, 'Queen', " Agatha declared sternly. "With a new social system, there will be a new type ruler . . . Now, on with the final bout."

Snickering, Art leaned over to Cedric. "She's really going to make things hot."

Cedric smiled. "*We may do a little cooking ourselves tonight.*"

Art stared askance at him.

"I think I got Anson worked up enough to fix things so that this city can't be occupied for more than three or four months, regardless of what happens in the next few days."

CLARK WAS one of the last to climb through the ropes. He gripped his staff nervously, as though afraid he might lose it even before the contest to determine the sixth finalist started.

Most of the other contenders were already in the ring. Big men stripped to the waist, they gripped and regripped their weapons anxiously and swung them in practice strokes.

Clark rested the butt of his stick on the ground. Mistake number one had been impetuously entering the tournament. Mistake number two

had been believing that Art and Cedric would help him win. He hadn't seen either of them the entire day, except for the brief appearance of the latter in the dressing room to serve wine to the contenders. But Cedric hadn't even paused to speak with him.

Waiting for the final three contestants to enter, he turned toward the stage. Immediately, his eyes met Beatrice's.

She glanced uneasily at Agatha, ascertaining that the Mayoress wasn't looking at her, and returned her stare to Clark. Then she smiled briefly.

Beatrice was in a white gown with a flaring neckline that bared her shoulders. Her hair was piled regally atop her head in an intricate maze of swirls. From her ears dangled little bejeweled pendants that caught the light first from one spotlight, then from another, and sent it sparkling out into the theater.

Had he acted so unwisely in contending? Clark wondered whether he wouldn't have entered even if he had been under the physiological restraint of a periodic injection.

She smiled again and he gripped the staff determinedly, grinned back. Then he turned to study his seventeen opponents.

The man next to him yawned.

Agatha rose and blew a whistle

and a giant of a professional contender across the ring wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and shook his head.

Then the man on Clark's right was stalking him, staff raised in swinging position. Clark stood his ground, gripping the stick widely and holding it in parry position.

Beatrice, he had noticed, had beautiful hands too—not at all like the hands of the farmer's wife. But Audrey had tilled the soil practically all her life, while Beatrice had probably never used her hands except in self-ministration.

The man feigned a blow, stepped back and thrust with the tip of his stick. Clark side-stepped, parried and knocked the weapon aside, almost sending it flying from his opponent's grip.

Then he shifted stance and swung the shaft like a scythe in front of him. The man tried to leap over it; lost his balance, and fell against the ropes. He yawned again.

Five men had fallen in the center of the ring and the surviving contestants had re-paired.

Clark's opponent brought his staff swinging down viciously in a chopping motion and again Clark dodged it; thrust; caught the man in the chest and sent him flailing backward.

Beatrice liked him—that much seemed apparent. Even despite the strict code of behavior between

man and wife that existed across the river, she would probably make concessions that most women never made to their husbands. But, would she be as complaisant if she were suddenly thrust into the position of sharing equal rights with him?

CLARK'S opponent shook his head and wiped his eyes. He seemed to be having trouble with his vision. Taking advantage of the condition, Clark rushed him, staff swinging.

The man went down, rolled over and lay still. For a second, Clark stood over him puzzled. He was sure his staff had missed completely.

There was a three-way battle going on in the center of the ring and, over on the right, two men were parrying each other's blows . . . That was all. The rest had been eliminated.

The battling pair swung at each other. They both missed—but collapsed anyway!

Confounded, Clark stalked the remaining trio. One of them saw his advance; withdrew from the others and charged him. But the man held his staff in one hand while he used the other to suppress a yawn. He ended his charge before he reached Clark and stopped to shake his head. Then, quite accidentally, a swinging stick, wielded by one of the pair behind the man,

struck him a glancing blow on the shoulder and he dropped and lay still.

It was incredible! Clark hadn't struck a single one of the competitors, yet he was among the three who were still standing!

Not stopping to rationalize, he closed in on the other two, his stick cutting the air, as one of the men got a thrust through the other's guard and buried the tip of his staff in his adversary's abdomen. The man grunted, fell. The victor of the incident turned to meet Clark.

The man thrust twice and swung once. But all his motions were sluggish. And his eyes were dazed. Clark leaped out of the way of a second thrust; got his stick through to the other's chest, and pushed. The man staggered backward, fell over a prostrate contender, and tried to rise. It looked like he wouldn't.

At least, Clark realized it had to *seem* like a fight. He ran forward and brought his staff crashing down toward the other's head, throttling the blow just before it landed. It had the appearance of a vicious maneuver, but the rod landed with only little force.

The man lowered his head onto a forearm and lay still.

Clark backed away in surprise until he reached the ropes. Some in the audience were booing the contestants. Others were applauding

his victory.

Bribery? Had the contestants been paid to drop in the ring? But neither Art nor Cedric had a large enough balance in his municipal account to undertake a fraud of such extensive proportions!

He realized his back was to the stage and he turned around—only feet away from Agatha and Beatrice. The girl was smiling openly at him now.

A guard raced across the stage and confronted the Mayoress. He shouted to make himself heard above the tumult. "Your informer was right! They're trying to burn off the oil supplies! We need more men! They came in stronger force than we expected!"

"Take as many as you need," she directed. "Have they done any damage yet?"

"Got two of the biggest tanks emptied!"

Abruptly the hole in the roof let through a different kind of light—a violently red-hued reflection that fired the underside of low-floating clouds.

In the audience, Cedric turned to Art. "Timed almost perfectly," he said, glancing through the roof.

"Will anything burn—beside the fuel?"

"No, dammit. The ground slopes away from the buildings onto a plain. But it's all right for a starter. This'll take care of all the reserve

fuel. The immediate supply on hand at the powerhouse can't last more than a couple of months."

"Let's go get Clark and watch the fire," Art suggested. "Judging from the bewilderment on his face you'll probably have to do some explaining about what went into the wine and how the ingredients of the Michael were handed down from generation in even the best of the Cincy bars."

CHAPTER VI

"YOU MEN there—stay away from the edge!"

In compliance with the order, Art and Cedric retreated from the parapet wall on the roof of the foundry workers' hotel-dormitory.

It was Anson who had shouted the warning. "Can't let them find out we're having a meeting up here," he explained, still breathing heavily from his twenty-two storey climb up cluttered and long-unused stairways.

Below, a special silence held a relentless grip on the giant but almost dead city. It was Sunday morning.

Even in his new position away from the edge, Art could still see the long stretch of deserted avenue at which he had been staring. Years ago, he imagined, there had been only the ornate oaks evenly spaced along the neutral grounds of

the thoroughfare. Now, there were pine saplings too—thick at the far end of the avenue, thin and young in the rectangles of soil closer to the center of the city. They were symbolic of the march of desolation from the country into the city, he thought.

Hundreds of men were on the roof now. Anson waved his arms for silence.

"Men," he said, "there were four of us killed night before last trying to show Agatha we don't want to be segregated."

As a ripple of angry whispers spread through the assembly, Art turned to Cedric. "At least," he observed, "it got their ire up."

"Sufficiently?" the dancer asked skeptically.

"Remains to be seen." Art shrugged.

"So it seems," Anson continued, "that Agatha isn't going to put up with any demonstrations. Now that still leaves us with a decision to make on tactics. Either we accept segregation, or we decide to abandon the city, or we revolt."

"Revolt!" Cedric shouted, nudging Art.

"Revolt!" echoed two others scattered in the crowd.

Art grasped the dancer's arm. "Don't get involved," he warned.

"If we all decide to revolt," Anson said, "we will revolt. But first, we've got to consider this thing

thoroughly."

"Got the farmers ready to go if anything happens?" Art asked Cedric in a low voice.

"They've been on the alert since Friday night. But, hell, it doesn't look like anything's going to happen. This bunch doesn't impress me as a mad mob."

Frowning, Art felt he had to agree.

"Now, I've been thinking," Anson was saying, "that we ought not to do anything until after Tuesday night. We can make a desperate appeal to the Mayoress at the final round of the tournament."

There was a murmur of approval. Art and Cedric looked at each other disappointedly.

"If she refuses us flatly," Anson continued, "if we can't convince her that segregation won't be good for anybody, then we'll still have time to act."

"Where's the time coming from?" Cedric shouted. "They're putting the plan in effect tomorrow!"

"No," Anson corrected. "It's just the temporary classification tomorrow. The other changes won't come until Wednesday—the actual segregation."

"I say make the appeal!" someone urged.

Scores of other voices were raised in support of the motion.

Cedric thrust up his fist in pro-

test. But Art caught his arm and drew it down. "Let things go for a while," he cautioned.

Cedric sneered. "But where's our rebellion?"

"I think it'll come along. Anyway, we can use another day or two to smooth out our strategy. We still need a better plan for seizing the ferries."

"But how are we going to get them to revolt when we want them to?"

"I just thought of something that can't miss. But we'll wait until the workers get a bit more desperate before we use it."

THE PALL of Sunday morning depression extended even across the river to the Mayoress' residence where Clark sat dejectedly in her study.

"But, Your Honor!" he beseeched. "I'd rather not be the one to segregate the men!"

"Nonsense," Agatha exclaimed. "I'd do it myself, but I don't think it would be proper for the Mayoress to concern herself with so routine a matter."

"But I'll make enemies! Almost every selection will be considered wrong!"

"It was your plan," she said exasperatedly. "You're going to put it in effect. I'll be at the Union Terminal for a while, long enough to give official flavor to the sepa-

ration."

She nodded toward the door, dismissing him curtly.

Outside, he thrust his hands into his pockets spiritedlessly and started for the ferry. He was abreast of the play area adjoining the Mayoress' house when he heard his name called softly.

Beatrice was motioning from a swing under a large oak at the edge of the lot. He went over and sat on the ground beside her.

"Will you win Monday night?" she asked solicitously.

"Announcing girls," he reminded, "aren't supposed to show any preference among the contenders."

"I know."

There was something regal about her. Something that made him feel insignificant in her presence—smaller, he imagined, than the average man felt when near a woman. Her face was smooth and white and her hair meticulously arranged. She wore a frilly dress that made her seem even more sequestered.

Again, in his imagination, he placed Audrey beside the girl, compared them. The resulting magnification of their differences was distressing. He had intended the comparison as a means of reassuring himself that within Beatrice, too, was an inherent but inhibited characteristic that would make her want to work beside the man she

loved.

But now, troublesomely, he wondered whether that was what *he* wanted. Audrey was humble and practical. Beatrice was proud and beautiful. There didn't seem to be anything sacrilegious about a woman as plain as the farmer's wife working in the fields in discarded clothing to conceal her identity and her womanhood. But, wouldn't it be iniquitous to expect the same of the girl beside him?

"Do you want me to win the final round?" he asked.

"Oh, yes—Clark," she answered eagerly, but hesitating in her condescension to use his first name.

Her hand had reached out and found his arm. But, timorously she withdrew it; glanced apprehensively toward Agatha's residence.

Would she be able to adapt to one-one? Could any of the women, Clark wondered, make the change? He had to find out.

"I remember this park from when I was a child—before I went across the river," he lied, laughing. "I remember it well because I heard two of the women discussing a movement that started somewhere on the western coast. They could still talk between cities then."

Her attention was full on him as he continued the falsehood, striving for casualness in his voice. "It seems that some of the men wanted to start a queer cult in which

there would be only one man for every woman throughout the whole city."

She drew back, surprised. "But that's against the law!—It didn't succeed, did it?"

HE sighed, but managed to conceal his disappointment over her disdainful reaction. "Of course not . . . It was going to be a community where a man and a woman belonged to each other, instead of the man belonging to the woman. They had a philosophy that men and women should be equal and should work together—"

"Of course it couldn't have succeeded," she interrupted thoughtfully. "Not unless the women wanted it to. Not when it's so simple to make sure that children are going to be boys. Sobicar and the other ingredients . . ." She stopped sharply. "Women *work* did you say?"

He nodded, laughing to impress her with his own pretended light regard for the entire issue. "The men were going to *force* the women to do away with sex control. They were going to punish them if they didn't have as many girls as boys—even more."

She stiffened and Clark read apprehension in her incredulous stare.

"Repugnant, wasn't it?" he said soberly.

Her face was frozen with disbelief.

It was no use! The entire idea of one-one was so alien that he couldn't imagine her ever being reconciled to it. Then he tensed in response to a preplexing consideration which hadn't occurred to him before . . . By what authority did he have it that he would ever be responsible for her conversion to one-one—even if Art and Cedric's ambitions were realized? They had never told him he would be among the males chosen to participate in their new society!

Sullenly, he rose to leave.

"Clark," she whispered, "even if I don't show it tomorrow night, I'll be hoping that you win."

He smiled feebly.

In deep thought, she watched him leave studying the square set of his shoulders and the sharp features of his profile as he turned on the sidewalk.

If only he could win! Then it would be he and she—together! She smiled as she savored the thought. She wouldn't treat him like Agatha treated Mister Agatha. It was all right for a woman to show her superiority—but not to that extent.

Then she frowned in sudden confusion. The relationship that she imagined between her and Clark . . . wasn't it somewhere in between Agatha's relationship with her husband and the sort of man-woman-belonging-to-each-other philosophy

that Clark had described? Profoundly, she wondered how it would be if a man and a woman worked together like he said; if they were—equal; if, even more radical, there were no sex predetermination at all!

Beatrice was still seated on the swing a half-hour later when she watched another man stride towards Agatha's residence. Accompanied by a guard, he was as large as Clark and even more broad-shouldered. But his face was not handsome. There was something distasteful about the features. For one thing, his lips were much out of proportion. And his hips undulated in a peculiar swing.

She watched him wait on the porch until the Mayoress let him in.

AGATHA, PERTURBED, led Hank down the hall to her study. "When I issued authorization for you to use the ferry," she tossed over her shoulder, "I didn't think you'd be disturbing my Sunday mornings."

He followed her into the room and she stood stiffly in front of her desk, making it apparent that she was not going to put him at ease.

"Couldn't you have used the videophone?" she demanded.

"There's no more videophone. The last type A converter burned out last night."

She sighed resignedly. "Oh, well. We've been expecting it. We really don't need any communication aids, though. The city's compact enough to do without them. . . What do you want?"

"There isn't going to be a revolt. You see—"

She scowled; folded her arms in a stiff gesture of disapprobation. "First you report there's going to be a rebellion against the worker-contender segregation. Now you tell me there isn't. Can't you get the thing straight? Or can't those stupid men make up their minds?"

"Oh, the revolt may still come off. But it's been temporarily canceled. They're going to make an appeal to you first. If that doesn't work, then they'll decide what else to do."

Agatha clenched her fists and hunched over the desk, glowering at him. "You came over here just to tell me the men are going to make an appeal?" she demanded irritably. "Don't you think I'll find that out when they make the appeal? Now get back on the other side of the river and don't bother me again until you have definite plans to report—names, times, places, arms, if the rebels are going to carry any."

Cowering, he backed off. "Yes, Your Honor."

The guard was waiting for him on the sidewalk. Together, they

started back for the ferry, walking in silence.

The girl was still on the swing. She was staring at him again.

Suddenly he recognized her—Beatrice Darton, the one Clark was risking his life for in the tournament! He let his contempt pour out, hoping that, like something tangible, it would find its way across the distance to her. She wasn't even pretty! She was too slim and her hair was too wavy. There was something too—feminine about her!

CHAPTER VII

MONDAY FOUND the Union Terminal busier than it had been for over a century and a half. Like a hibernating, if somewhat disheveled, giant suddenly come to life, it seemed to stand proudly in the morning sun, basking in a new sense of recaptured importance that it hadn't known for generations—a sense of eminence that it welcomed despite the mitigating influence of thousands of broken panes; of fallen columns in its central waiting room; of huge segments of marble chipped from the walls of its once ornate concourse.

Age-stained panels happily reverberated with the tread of hundreds of feet which stirred the dust of its tile and exposed ceramic intricacies which hadn't enjoyed human

gaze since the last train had trudged wearily in on a spur track during a nostalgic afternoon in some forgotten eon.

But the silent alacrity of the station was not reflected in the attitude of the thousands within—least of all Clark Thompson, who sat sullenly behind a long table in the main concourse.

An endless stream of men, grim indignation their only expression, filed past the table, each pausing briefly in front of him.

The elderly man before Clark now was short and slim. His shoulders were an inverted V that continued almost in straight lines from his neck to his elbows. Hesitatingly, he placed his identification card on the desk.

Clark stared at him. "You're in sanitation?"

"Yes. Refuse Collector Second Class."

Rapidly, Clark wrote his name and designation in the thicker of two books before him. "Worker," he said, motioning the man on.

"But I'm strong!" the refuse collector protested. "Look—" He brought his fist toward his shoulder, indicating what was supposed to be a muscle under the khaki sleeve.

"Worker," Clark repeated, handing him back his card. "Next."

Three and one—that was the ratio he was attempting to maintain. Three names in the workers' book

to one in the contenders' book. But, of the hundreds who had passed before him thus far, there hadn't been one newly-designated worker who didn't protest that he should be a contender. And over half of those assigned to the status of contender had indicated, in no calm tones, that they thought they would be better classified in the other category.

Agatha, seated next to him, folded her arms judiciously, indicating her approval of his decision.

The next man, a burly character whose arms bulged under the material of his full-dress coat, presented his card.

Clark entered his name as a contender.

"You're making me a tourneyman, aren't you?" The man leaned irately across the table. "You think I'll be a good fighter! Well I won't—Look . . ."

He held up a small square of white cloth. On it was embroidered fields of lilies stretching out on either side of a river. "This is the kind of work I do!"

"Contender," Clark repeated wearily.

"Well, I won't do it!" the man shouted indignantly. "I won't contend—not ever. I—"

Two guards came over at Agatha's signal and hustled him off.

"Segregationist!" he shouted as they forced him out the doorway.

Several men in the line repeated the epithet, somewhat more constrainedly.

Agatha rose, laughing. "I think I've been here long enough. You're almost half way through anyway. Knock it off a couple of hours for lunch, then finish up. I'll leave enough guards to take care of any opposition."

The men obsequiously made way for her as she left the large room.

"How're you doing, boss?"

Clark looked up into Hank's smiling face. *

"I'm sure glad typists are scarce," he went on, handing over his card. "Say, about the Starlight . . . You got the tournament tomorrow night and you don't want to get too tense for it, you know."

Disgustedly, Clark handed him back the card.

"Contender," he announced vengefully.

Hank started. "But—" he flustered. "But—but I—"

Clark scratched his name in the thin book.

"Break for lunch," he shouted out into the room. "Be back at one."

PERTURBED, CLARK paced the floor of his office, ignoring the amused stares of Art and Cedric as they sat on the edge of his desk.

"Don't act so damned worried,"

Cedric bantered. "You'll come out of the tournament intact."

Clark swore. "At the rate that I'm making enemies, I don't imagine I'll even *reach* the tournament intact."

"About that tournament," Cedric said, absently fingering the tucks on his blouse. "I think we have it all fixed."

Clark stared expectantly at him.

"By depleting our financial resources," the dancer went on, "we were able to buy a substantial amount of victory. We had to dedicate a sizable portion of your account too, but we knew you'd consent."

"What did you do?"

"We got through to the winners of the first and fourth bouts in the preliminaries. Nice chaps by the names of Walton and Craddock. For a substantial sum, they agreed to do their fighting in your interest. Walton's favored to win, you know. Craddock is added insurance. All you have to do is stay out of trouble until they dispose of the competition. Then you can proceed to defeat them. It'll look very realistic this time."

"Not that I mind it," Clark said, "but it seems rather silly to buy a victory if the workers are going to revolt in the Square at the inauguration even before I get a chance to go across the river."

"The tournament victory," Art

explained, "is only insurance against the revolt not coming off, or fizzling. If our boys don't get a chance to step in—"

"I know," Clark interrupted. "I'll be on the inside as a spy . . . And how many women do you expect to snatch in the raid Wednesday?"

"About four hundred. We'd like to get more. But there's nothing to gain in grabbing women away from their children and husbands—women who are practicing one-one fanatics."

"And you think you'll be able to change their outlook?" Clark was using the blunt, sarcastic questions to parade his skepticism before them. "You think you'll be able to tell them, 'Okay, girls everything's going to be different from tomorrow on'? You think they'll accept one-to-one without any resistance?"

"They'll come around," Cedric assured laughing.

"What about someone like Beatrice? Can you see her out in a shack that's half logs; hauling in wood for a fire; dressed in dirty coveralls; helping mend a fence?"

Art laughed soundlessly. "Audrey's mother, I understand, was a very pretty woman. She had no trouble making the change. Don't forget, the transition is to something that's *natural*."

Clark turned eagerly toward

them. He had to know what was going to happen to him in their plans. Was he supposed to end up with a wife and some small cabin in a rural area? Would the wife be one of their choosing, or of his?

"Look," he began, "there's one detail we've overlooked so far. How do I—"

But a man in a full-dress suit covered with grease, one tail sheared off, rushed into the room.

"Bearings burned on C dynamo," he panted.

Clark's face became rigid with disappointment. "How soon can you start repairs?"

"Can't. Not until we resume trade with Peka. That's the only place where they make the parts we need—if they still make them."

Clark ran a hand hopelessly through his hair. "Let's go have a look. Maybe we can shim up."

But even as he led the others out, he knew it was impossible.

As they stepped into the hall, Hank left his place of concealment behind the partly open door of the adjoining room. For a moment he stood reflecting on what he had heard. Then he smiled.

IT WAS AN oddly different world. There was an unbelievable surplus of women. There was only a meager sprinkling of men—so few that each one occupied a palatial penthouse atop one of the

skyscrapers. Clark's residence was the highest in the city. From it he could watch the activity of the thousands of working women, scurrying like minuscule insects in the deep shadows of the street.

But the women were not working. They were revolting! Necks strained upward as they beat with their fists on the blank walls of the skyscrapers. Beatrice was directly below him, shouting angry words that were lost in the greater clamor, thrashing with upraised fists and forearms the bricks of the building.

His lofty palace shook. It trembled with the persistent impacts of her frantic blows.

Suddenly he was awake, gripping the arms of the chair in his hotel-dormitory room. But the regularly recurring vibrations continued. Annoyed, he glanced at the door; watched its panel shake each time knuckles in the hall fell against it.

It had been too early for bed, even despite the rigors of the first day of segregation; even despite the fact that the final round of the tournament was less than twenty-four hours off. So he had relaxed in the chair—and fallen asleep.

Brushing hair from his forehead, he went over and opened the door.

Hank stood in the hall, grinning. He pushed his way in.

"I know I'm a little late," he said. "But things don't really

get under way at the Starlight until almost midnight."

Clark put a hand against his chest and pushed him back toward the hall. But the other sidled away from the pressure of the hand and closed the door behind him.

"Come on," he urged, smiling more effusively. "I can be fun . . . At any rate, you'll have the opportunity to talk me out of something I might otherwise do — like visiting Mayoress Agatha."

Misgivingly, Clark studied him.

"You see," the typist went on, "I know about buying off Walton and Craddock in the tournament. Those tactics might be common, but they're still illegal."

Clerk gasped. Hank had found out!

"I also know the names of three men who are leading a revolt against segregation — one of whom is pretending to be imposing it on the city. I know they are going to pull off the works at the inauguration Wednesday morning and try to get away with a few hundred girls."

He had overheard the conversation with Art and Cedric that afternoon!

Hank stood staring triumphantly at Clark, letting his hand fall sympathetically on his shoulder.

"When I like a person," the typist admonished, "I don't like to be snubbed, like you've been doing

me. But maybe we can forget about what's happened and start over . . . We'll celebrate at the Starlight."

Bewildered, Clark shrugged off the other's hand with only a half-measure of conscious resentment. He needed time to think out what Hank's discovery of the plot meant.

"You—you were in the office this afternoon?" he stammered.

Hank nodded. "But I knew about the revolt before then. I just didn't know when it was going to come off. And I didn't know some of the men were going to try to capture women at the same time."

Hank grinned. "But maybe I can be influenced not to report it all to the Mayoress. Try it."

He crossed to the bed to get Clark's coat.

It was imperative that the threat posed by the typist be neutralized—for the next two days, at least. In custody of the farmers, he would be harmless. Clark arrived at the decision spontaneously.

He grasped the other by the shoulder and spun him around, drove a fist into his face.

The blow stunned Hank. But only momentarily. He shook off its effects almost effortlessly. And, as Clark came at him again, he stopped the charge with a sharp, vicious blow to the face. Clark stumbled backward, more bewildered over the surprising rugged

nature the other was exhibiting than over the effects of the punch. He remembered now how he had been warned in early hygiene classes against underestimating the physical vigor of such men.

"All right," Hank rasped angrily, "if you'd rather it the other way—"

Wrathfully, he strode for the door.

Clark tried to stop him; bore in to aim another blow at his head. But the typist cursed and parried it with ease. Then his own fist struck out again; found its mark with crushing force.

Choking back down the debasement of final rejection, Hank stepped over the other's still form and stormed into the hallway.

CHAPTER VIII

IN AGATHA'S office, Beatrice pored over the final page of the Clark Thompson report on segregation. The Mayoress had insisted that she familiarize herself with it so she would know the nature of the new system. But the conclusions were boring. The recommendations were complicated. And she had to fight a persistent indifference to interest herself in them at all.

There was a tap on the door and she shouted permission for the caller to enter.

The panel swung open and, meekly, Mister Agatha stood in the doorway.

"The guards escorted that Smithers man from across the river. He's outside now."

"Smithers?"

"The one who's reporting on opposition against the new plan. He wants to see Her Honor. I told him she can't be disturbed. But he says it's important . . . Maybe if you'd talk with him. . ."

Beatrice restrained a laugh as she studied Mister Agatha's behavior. He was squirming pathetically between an impulse to stay long enough to finish his business, and another to flee from her expected wrath. But her disposition toward being amused melted as she wondered soberly whether Clark would become as subservient.

"Show him in."

Relieved, Mister Agatha hastily withdrew. A moment later, the man from across the river entered excitedly. She recognized him as the one who had called on Her Honor only yesterday.

He frowned uncomfortably. "I thought I was going to see the Mayoress."

"If you have anything to report, you can report it to me. Her Honor can't be disturbed."

Indecisively, he stood staring at her.

"Report it to me," she repeated

sternly, "or get back across the river."

"You'll tell Mayoress Agatha?"

Simmering over his impertinence, she waited in firm silence.

"The revolt is going to come in the Square at the inauguration," he blurted finally, gripping the edge of the desk. "And they're not only going to try to throw off the worker-contender plan, they're also going to revolt *against the women! They're going to try to kidnap hundreds of girls; turn them into workers too!*"

Beatrice stiffened. "Are you sure?"

"I got it straight from the three leaders." He placed a slip of paper on her desk. "Here are their names and designations."

Thoughtfully, she stared across the room. "I'm sure Agatha will be ready for them."

"The tournament tomorrow night figures in with it some way too. One of the leaders of the movement is a contender."

With irrepressible presentiment, she tried to keep her eyes from gravitating to the paper with the three names on it. Then she clenched her hands as Clark's name swam into focus.

She closed her eyes for a moment. He had been so—interesting. And he had lasted through the more gruelling preliminaries. The chances that he would win were

only six-to-one now.

Abruptly, she remembered their conversation under the oak. All he had said about a supposed plan on the western coast to overthrow the system had been fictitious; intended only in mockery so that she would later bitterly realize she had practically been warned!

"And," Hank continued anxiously, "they've fixed it so that the one who is contending will win. They've bribed off the two strongest contenders!"

Interested, she looked up. Then he *would* win! But despair seized her again. What good would it do? If he won, it would only be in the interest of executing some phase of the revolt plan.

Suddenly a wave of alarming realization washed over her. Clark and the other two were seditionists! They would be subject to summary trial. And there would be nothing lenient about their sentencing.

Numbly, she forced herself to consider the entire revelation objectively, indifferently. And why shouldn't she? Hadn't Clark been using her for some misogynous purpose—simply pretending that he had entered the tournament because there was a fondness for her that he couldn't deny?

"Don't you think we'd *better* disturb Agatha?" Hank suggested.

"Not until morning," she said firmly.

"Then I'll stay and tell her about it myself."

"You'll return across the river and see what else you can find out . . . Why they should want one of their leaders to win a tournament only a day before they revolt."

Hank frowned "But I can't go back! They know I'm spying for the Mayoress now!"

"I'm ordering you to do what I know Agatha would demand."

Shrugging hopelessly, he turned. But he stopped to look at her again before leaving. "Will she seize the leaders tomorrow? Or will she wait and be prepared for the rebellion?"

"I rather imagine she'll wait for the revolt. She likes a good show."

CLARK SAT on the sofa in Art's room. The latter paced nervously while Cedric stood by the window, staring out into the night.

"How much did he know?" Art asked.

Clark was still trying to rub the soreness out of his jaw. "Everything we talked about in the office this afternoon."

"Then he doesn't know that the farmers are involved in the plan," Cedric observed. "He thinks the full strength of the rebels is contained among some segment of workers. That's still an advantage for us."

"Why didn't you stop him?"

Art asked.

Clark laughed sardonically.

Art spread his hands helplessly. "Well there's no sense in looking for him. He's either already reported what he knows, or he's adequately hidden until he gets a chance to . . . I'll go tell the farmers the whole thing's off."

But Cedric held up a hand. "Let's apply some logic to this problem. First, we'll grant that Hank knows a revolt is planned and is anxious to report it to the Mayoress. But he can't hope to get across the river. He's no privileged character. The guards wouldn't let him across unless he convinced them it was in the nature of an emergency. Yet, he can't take the chance of disclosing his information to anyone . . . He'd be afraid that the guard he approached might turn out to be one of the rebels."

Art straightened attentively. "It's also possible," he said, contributing to the optimism, "that Hank was merely bluffing—using what he'd learned in an attempt to force his attention on Clark."

"Exactly," Cedric said emphatically. "Wouldn't we feel like damned fools if we called off the entire plan on the basis of a threat by one individual who isn't really interested in anything more than gaining a personal advantage?"

Cedric shrugged. "So I'm willing to go on with the arrangements if

—” he glanced at Art — if you can tickle off the revolt, like you say.”

Art smiled. “The rebellion can’t miss. When Agatha turns down their plea at the tournament, they’ll be ready for the final prod.”

Gloomily, Clark looked up at them. “Suppose Hank wasn’t bluffing? Suppose he manages to get through with the warning?”

“In that case,” Cedric explained, “we’ll be arrested long before the time for the rebellion. The farmers won’t receive any word from us and they won’t go through with the plan. They’ll simply wait until the city deteriorates a bit more and step in as the women are forced to abandon it. The farmers aren’t yet under suspicion.”

Art looked at Clark. “Still with us—even if it means arrest?”

“Maybe,” Clark clipped. “If I knew how I’ll fit into your new system if everything comes off as planned. Do I get a plot of land in the country, a couple of cows and Beatrice? Or do I get just the the land and cows?”

“You *don’t* get Beatrice,” Cedric said flatly. “You don’t even get the land and cows. We have no intentions of *assigning* women to men. Mutual acceptance is the only thing that will gain you a wife.”

“If she wants me and I want her, than I can draw her from a — pool. Is that the way it’ll work?” Clark

asked, relieved.

The other two nodded.

“Sounds fair enough. After that, we go find ourselves a few acres and settle down?”

Art and the dancer shook their heads.

“The new system,” said Cedric, “isn’t going to be as primitive as you imagine. Our ambitions are a bit more expansive than settling down in a rural area and leaving urbanization to a later generation. Only a few hundred miles from here—several weeks downriver and across country—is one of the cities that was busted up by a revolt against the worker-contender plan. Actually, the city, Sanlou, is in much better shape physically than this one. It can be rehabilitated rather easily. Life will be far from rural.”

Clark looked up, surprised.

“We haven’t told you this until now,” Art explained, “because we couldn’t be positive you were completely with us. If you reneged, the secret of Sanlou would still be safe and the city would be spared future crusades to rescue women.”

“You see, Clark,” Cedric offered, “the farmers aren’t the only ones involved in our scheme. There are several hundred displaced workers from Chi who are hidden among the farm families around here. They drifted down after the rebellion broke up that city. They’ll help

out in the raid across the river. They'll also go downriver with us to Sanlou as part of the new populace of that city."

Clark frowned. "If you're taking men, too, he asked puzzledly, "why not displaced workers from here?"

"Can't be done." Art shook his head. "You can't whip up a revolt on the basis of opposition to the worker-contender segregation and, at the same time, let the rebels in on the secret that the fireworks are just diversionary. Anyway, it would take months of patient explanation to get the average man to accept one-one, even in theory."

"The average man from Chi accepted it," he reminded.

"Because Cedric and I spent a year explaining it to them after the women were forced to abandon that city."

But Clark was somewhat indignant. "So I'm now trusted enough to be told a little more of the plan?"

Art slapped him on the shoulder. "Can't blame us for being cautious."

"Anything else I don't know?"

"I think that's all . . . except, perhaps, that when the farmers seize the ferries during the revolt, they will not only be isolating the guards on this side of the river, they will also be acquiring transportation for a grand exodus down-

river—the abducted girls, the men from Chi and the farmers and their families."

"We'll make a stop downstream," Cedric concluded, "to pick up the farmwives and families where they'll be waiting."

IT WAS LIKE having an entire building to himself. The large auditorium room, on a mid-level of the skyscraper, overlooked Central Square. Below, Hank could see the carpentry corps erecting the extraordinarily high platform for tomorrow's inauguration.

Across the Square, a sanitation crew was sweeping out the Opera House foyer in preparation for the throng that would pack the building that night for the final round of the tournament.

It was a fine vantage point, Hank thought, smiling. If, as Beatrice had indicated, Agatha would let the revolt materialize at the inauguration so there would be a 'good show,' he would be in an excellent position to witness it.

Below, groups of men were entering the Square to watch the work.

Hank started as the door squealed open. Peter came in with a covered plate and set it on the window sill.

"You're going to stay here until the inauguration, Mr. Smithers?"

"Until I think it's the right time to go down and tell the Mayoress

about me being classified as a contender."

"She'll reclassify you when you tell her?"

"Of course. She knows I don't belong in that category."

As he spoke, he watched more men filter into the Square from side streets.

"What's going on down there?" he asked.

"Foundrymen. The plant closed today. No more work for them."

CHAPTER IX

AGATHA, WITH her entourage spread out on either side and to her rear, sat tensely on the Opera House stage. The three-man delegation of workers stood nervously before her and Beatrice.

There was a profound, foreboding silence that reached into every remote, darkened corner of the great theater. Even on the fighters' platform, the six finalists had foregone their customary muscle-limbering exercises to watch and listen.

In the orchestra, Cedric touched Art's arm. "Here it comes," he whispered.

Anson, flanked by the other two delegates, cleared his throat.

"It's about segregation, Your Honor. The workers, almost to a man, are against it. We feel that it is unwise to attempt a re-organization at this particular time."

He paused. Anxiously, every worker in the audience waited to see whether the Mayoress would cut his complaint short. But her face was expressionless.

"With inter-city trade a thing of the past," Anson went on, more rapidly, "and with the foundrymen idle and not justifying their economic existence, segregation would bankrupt the city. Already there are too few workers and too many other persons relying on their output. To add a whole corps of tourney-men to the non-productive list would make it impossible for the city to continue as an economic entity."

Still Agatha said nothing.

Anson glanced uneasily behind him. But continued silence was his only support from the audience.

"So, Your Honor," he said subserviently, "we must ask you to reconsider and abandon the worker-contender segregation."

After a long while, she calmly asked, "Is that all?"

Uncertainly, Anson nodded.

"Arrest them," she snapped at the nearest group of guards.

A brief murmur of protest spread through the audience. But scores of guards appeared from the wings and exits to patrol the aisles with threateningly swinging clubs.

Anson and his delegation were prodded backstage.

Agatha rose, surveyed the spec-

tators at length; seemed to be casting a brief glare at each one in particular.

"After the inaguration tomorrow," she directed, "everyone will remain assembled in the square for physical examinations to verify the original segregation. I would advise no further demonstration. My guards will be out in full force . . . Now, on with the tournament."

But, as she returned to her seat, workers, began to trickle from the rows and out through the exits.

"Trouble?" Cedric asked, indicating the departing men.

"I don't think so," Art replied. "There's bound to be plenty who are a little scorched over the refusal. But they're probably just going on to the meeting place."

"Think Hank got through to Agatha? Think she knows about the raid tomorrow?"

"Doesn't look like it. If she did, I imagine that by now we would be where Anson and the rest of his delegation are going."

"What do you suppose happened to Hank?"

"He probably holed up with some of his friends. I guess he will stay out of the way until things quiet down a bit."

THAT SEEMED to settle the matter of the workers' appeal, Clark admitted in the ring, continuing to stare at Agatha after she

had finished her rebuff of the delegation. At least, it had all gone off as Art and Cedric had hoped.

Wiping moist hands on his trousers, he glanced at Beatrice. But still he was unable to attract her stare. There hadn't even been the merest suggestion of a shielded smile of encouragement. Did she know? Had Agatha found out about the plan from Hank and told her about it? It didn't seem likely, or surely countersteps would have been taken against the workers by now. Still he was almost certain that Beatrice's indifference was more than a precaution against Agatha's learning of her preference.

The referee's whistle jarred his thoughts back to the ring. Hastily, he checked the position of Craddock, fiery redhead and tallest man in the arena, and Walton, a shorter but much heavier fighter whose face bore innumerable scars from previous tournaments.

The tense enthusiasm of battle gripped the audience spontaneously and they roared as Clark stalked out cautiously to engage Walton, as he had been instructed.

The plan was rather simple. He and Walton would remain locked in a series of convincingly brutal grips until all but one of the other four contestants were eliminated. If the Victor of the four were Craddock, Clark would proceed to best Walton and go on to defeat the redhead.

If it were not Craddock, Walton would break free from Clark and engage the other remaining contender before letting Clark eliminate him.

It all seemed quite incapable of failure.

But they hadn't anticipated the burly contender on Clark's right who, apparently appraising Clark as an easy first victim, raced over to intercept him before he could lock with Walton. Nor had they considered the equally anxious tourneyman on Walton's left who lunged across the ring and leaped upon the latter's back with fists flailing.

Clark's adversary locked him in a back-breaking bear-hug that drained the air from his chest. Then, just when it seemed that unconsciousness would eliminate him, the man released him and hurled a fist in his face.

He fell, and the other leaped upon him, twisting his arm behind his back and forcing his wrist up against his shoulder. A tortuous conviction that soon his arm would snap at the elbow snatched him back to consciousness.

He shouted out in pain.

But abruptly the weight of the contender fell off his back and, straightening his arm, he looked around to see Walton driving the man toward the ropes with a series of blows to the body and head.

Across the ring, Walton's initial opponent lay motionless on the rough boards.

Walton finished the man off with a vicious knee into the abdomen and a crushing sledge hammer blow to his jaw. The victim reeled back; fell through the ropes. A sustained burst of applause greeted the automatic disqualification.

Clark rose shakily. Walton lunged over and caught his other arm in a hammer lock. But there was no pressure.

"When I give the word," Walton whispered, "you break free. Start pounding my face. I'll go out through the ropes too."

Clark tensed.

"Not now. Wait until Craddock gets the final one under control. It's got to look good . . . Start yelling or something."

Clark spread his legs, grimaced and shouted in pretended pain.

IN the center of the arena, Craddock and the sixth finalist were brutally exchanging punches, neither giving quarter.

Suddenly the big redhead managed to get an effective blow through the other's guard, jolting him. Two quick hooks shook the man ruthlessly and he staggered, his guard dropping. Doubtlessly, it was all over for him.

"Now!" Walton rasped, relaxing his grip on Clark's wrist.

Clark tore free, lunged away, pivoted and aimed a blow at Walton's chest.

The latter grunted. "In the face!" he whispered. "Make it look good!"

Clark tried again. The punch found his opponent's forehead, but not solidly. Walton had snapped his head back with it.

This time Clark connected with the man's jaw in an equally spectacular but no more effective hook. Then another.

Walton feigned a stagger; fell back toward the ropes.

Clark struck him once more and he went hurtling out into the first row of seats.

Turning, Clark braced to meet the charge of the single other man in the ring.

But it wasn't Craddock! The redhead lay unconscious in one of the corners!

The man sprang over the final few feet, hurled his arm out and caught Clark in a headlock.

Helplessly, he looked out over the audience, trying to see Art and Cedric.

His opponent added an abrupt jab to the face to the agony of the wrestling hold. Then another. They turned half around and Clark went down on one knee, desperately trying to break the hold.

Now he could see the stage. No longer was Beatrice an indifferent

observer. She was on her feet, her fists clenched and absolute anxiety on her face as she bit her lips.

In a frantic effort, Clark broke the hold, propelling the contender away from him.

As the man bore back in, he managed to snap the professional tourneyman's head back with a punch that carried all his weight with it. His adversary was stunned momentarily. Staggering, he sent his hand out groping for the rope; missed, then found it. He steadied himself, an animal-like growl welling in his throat.

Then he charged again, fists pumping, knees and feet coming up to add vehemence to the assault. Clark gave ground. The man's additional eighty pounds and five inches were insurmountable, however.

Clark didn't even see the final blow as it rammed through his guard.

In the audience, Art grimly watched Clark drop inertly to the floor. He rose, grasped Cedric's arm.

"Come on," he urged. "We just lost our insurance."

They pushed out the row and hurried down the aisle. In the foyer, Cedric asked, "Where does that leave us?"

"In the position where we have to make damned sure the rebellion comes off tomorrow."

In the street, they turned and struck off for the Markham Hotel meeting place.

STUNNED, Beatrice stood motionless on the stage, watching Clark rise on one knee and shake his head. A bedlam of cheering had broken out for the victor. But the din reached her ears in only weak force, attenuated by her despairing thoughts.

He had *almost won!* He had fought valiantly, just as she had known he would. He had even beaten the favorite!

But abruptly her shoulders sagged and she sighed in sudden realization that Clark had been *supposed* to win. Something had gone amiss . . . But it was better that he had been defeated. She fought her personal feelings to convince herself of that.

If he had won, he would no doubt be closer to success in his hopeless plot to kidnap some of the women. If he had won, she would have had to warn Agatha about his leadership in the uprising and the true nature of the rebellion. And Agatha would have tried him as a seditionist.

This way, at least he would escape with his life. Now she didn't have to reveal his treachery. The guards would be able to put down the revolt at the inauguration, even without the knowledge that it was

aimed at abduction of girls. Wasn't Agatha already prepared for trouble?

She looked over at the winner who was now climbing from the arena to be hoisted upon shoulders and borne through the streets to a night-long celebration marking his last few hours on this side of the river.

He was big and ugly and scarred and cruel. He smiled and dark gaps showed in place of even teeth. There was a huge scar stretching from his right temple, across his cheek and lips and down his neck almost to his chest. Two fingers were missing from his left hand, raised in acceptance of the crowd's acclaim.

She shuddered.

Then, impetuously, she raised her arms for attention.

"Wait!" she shouted above the din. Two powerful voiced guards repeated her command.

"I disqualify that man!" she announced, pointing to the winner. "His hand went through the ropes!"

Angry protests came in a wave from the audience.

"You can't do that, child," Agatha whispered protestingly in her ear.

"I'm doing it!" she said defiantly, expecting only the full wrath of the Mayoress to follow.

"The winner is Clark Thomp-

son," she announced, not waiting for Agatha's eruption.

Even more irate exclamations decried the decision. More guards filed out onto the stage to ring the women spectators protectively.

Clark stood staring dumfounded at Beatrice.

Agatha raised her hand for order.

"The winner is Clark Thompson," she affirmed.

Beatrice started; was even more startled when she turned and saw the Mayoress' sportive smile.

"I like your spunk, child," Agatha said praisingly. "Resourcefulness is a good quality for a leader—a queen to have." She chuckled. "Wish I had thought of something like this when it was my night here." Then, more seriously. "I'll assign him some guards until tomorrow; he may not be too popular after this."

CHAPTER X

WHILE CLARK showered, ten of the guards were in the backstage dressing room with him. A larger number was outside in the corridor. The Opera House had already emptied.

Absently he lathered himself, trying to align his thoughts into some semblance of order. But it was all too confusing—his responsibility, his commitments to Art and Cedric, his social incumbency, his obli-

gation to Beatrice . . . If only there had never been an Art and Cedric to complicate what, until the tournament, had been a pleasantly lethargic existence!

He shook his head in dismay. He owed the renegade pair something for the way the tournament had come out. Without them, a future mutually shared with Beatrice would not have become a certainty irrespective of the success or failure of tomorrow's raid.

He held the bar of soap up before his face and stared at it, frozen in thought.

"Mrs. Clark Thompson," he whispered.

. . . There would be endless work and the uncertainty of testing a new existence and the always present possibility that Beatrice, unable to adapt to one-one, would reject him with a lashing hate.

"Mister Beatrice," he said, his face still expressionless.

. . . That would be a future which would be solid — one that would offer security. It was the one to which he could adapt. The only prerequisite would be shaking from his mind the insidious philosophy of one-one, forgetting that Art and Cedric had even propounded the abortive principles.

But he would also have to dull his senses against the evidence of decay and creeping desolation and declining population.

Still, it would be easy . . . physically easy, if not conscionably so.

He would have only to tell Agatha that the workers were going to revolt against segregation in the Square tomorrow but that the revolt would be a diversionary activity. They would have only to shift the guard strength to the ferry landing — or, better yet, withdraw across the river and let an absence of resistance frustrate both the rebellion and the farmers' assault at the waterfront.

He could tell her tonight.

Or, providing for the possibility that Art and Cedric might foresee his last-minute defection and post confederates to intercept him, he could wait until the inauguration party crossed the river in the morning.

EXUBERANT CHEERS from the Opera House were a muted echo in the dark night air as Art stepped out on the roof of the foundry workers' hotel. Cedric drew up beside him, using the excess material of his balloon-like sleeve to wipe perspiration from his forehead. Only a few hundred men were on the roof. But the stream that extended from the Opera House to the hotel held forth the promise that soon the irate audience would number thousands.

"Think they'll go the limit?"

the dancer asked.

"Watch and see," Art suggested, smiling confidently.

The crowd reached capacity. That it was a more embittered group than had attended the previous meetings was readily obvious. There was less restraint in their resentful outbursts as they collected into minor groups to bemoan their predicament.

"An army without a general," Cedric observed, indicating the unoccupied ventilator exhaust from which Anson had conducted the previous meeting.

"Then I suppose it's our duty to provide one." Art leaped upon the structure.

Cedric came up beside him. The crowd quieted and turned to face them.

"We've seen what happened to Anson Howart and Rod Lorry and Horace Jennings." Art's voice was particularly calm but forceful. "We know now that segregation will go through regardless of what we do to stop it—short of violent resistance."

The men responded with a restless murmur.

"Do we accept segregation?" he demanded. "Or do we fight it?"

Scores of voices shouted out in approval of resistance. But Art noticed disconsolately that hundreds had remained silent. It indicated the same sort of reluctance

he had met in Cincy — an indifference so deep-rooted that it had been responsible for the failure of the workers' revolt in that city.

"Here's where we see whether you can qualify as Rabble-Rouser First Class," Cedric whispered facetiously.

One of the workers, his figure limned in the shaft of light rising from the staircase, came forward hesitantly, his hands on his hips.

"A lot of us," he said, nodding to his rear, "don't think an armed rebellion is necessary. Why don't we let them put in their worker-contender system? It'll make things tough for a few weeks. But they'll find out it can't work."

An expectant silence settled over the roof.

"It worked in five other cities," Art reminded.

"Sure," the worker acknowledged. "But weren't having any economic trouble in those cities. With the foundry closed here, and with so many of us being nothing but a drag on the others—"

Art waved his hand to silence him. "Here goes," he whispered to Cedric at the same time.

"A good many of you recognize me as a man who has been closely associated with Clark Thompson." Art let his voice drop to a lower level of somberness. "Even up until yesterday, when he sliced us up

into workers and contenders, I thought he was okay. But last night he told me about a secret recommendation that wasn't written into the report. It was given orally to Mayoress Agatha. She liked the idea. It goes into effect — tomorrow."

He surveyed them silently, letting the still moment generate suspense. Then:

"Why do you think they're going to call our next Mayoress 'Queen'—Queen Bea? The system is going to be one of segregated workers and contenders. Couldn't the two classes just as well be called 'workers' and 'drones'?"

His words were shooting out with a forceful, staccato effect now. "What we're going to have here is a society that will pretty generally parallel the setup in a beehive. There, the drones live off the workers and participate in reproducing the species. The workers are—*sterile*."

After a moment's silence, someone shouted. "But *we* aren't sterile!"

Art couldn't have asked for a more propitious response. "Not *to-night* we're not!" he returned.

There was a tumult of expletives expressing incredulity, confusion, anger, horror.

Cedric, twisting his head so the men couldn't see his expression, grinned. "That does it, I'd say,"

he whispered. "Why didn't you think of this in Cincy?"

"I think you'd better get on out into the country and tell them to keep their eyes on the top of the Wilton hotel for the signal. Take the area to the north. After I finish here I'll spread the word around in the section to the south."

Art called for silence.

"Eunuchs — that's what we'll be!" he shouted. "By this time tomorrow! Of course, we're not supposed to know that. But right after the inauguration they'll take us off, one by one—"

CEDRIC LEAPED from the ventilator housing and made his way to the stairway, not noticing the youth who brushed past him in stepping out onto the roof.

The youth went and stood at the front of the throng, thrusting his hands in his pockets.

"So, do we revolt?" the speaker asked.

A thousand voices shouted their assent.

Peter quickly withdrew his hands from his pockets and shook his fist in the air, as the others were doing.

"Tools make good weapons," the speaker said. "We'll go to the foundry and pick out what we'll need—hammers, wrenches, sickles . . . anything that can be hidden in our clothes."

"But we won't endanger the women," someone in the rear shouted. It was simultaneously a solicitous question and a suggestion that carried protest.

"We will protect ourselves. We will not even approach the platform with the Queen and her court. We will gather for the inauguration as though everything is normal. But we will be in a tight defensive alignment in the center of the Square. And, even before the ceremony starts; we will flatly announce there will be no new system. If we show the Mayoress we're ready to fight, there'll be no segregation."

"IT'S PAST midnight," Agatha rebuked. "You've known this since ten. Why didn't you report it sooner?"

"I came as fast as I could." Peter shifted uncomfortably in front of the huge woman. "But the guards at the ferry wouldn't believe me."

The Mayoress turned to Beatrice. "Did you think they were that determined to prevent the new system from going in?"

Beatrice didn't answer; glanced away.

"I knew Mister Smithers would want me to come over right away. I knew this was as important as the report he made Sunday."

"Report? Sunday?" Agatha re-

peated, confused.

"About their plans for the revolt at the inauguration and the names of the three leaders.

Agatha drew sternly erect. "I received no such report."

Beatrice slipped off the edge of the desk and crept unobtrusively toward the side door.

"Beatrice!" the Mayoress shouted.

She stopped, stiffened, but did not turn around.

"They wouldn't let him see you," Peter explained. "He told Queen Bea all about it."

For an ominous minute the Mayoress was silent.

"Then you don't know," Peter began, "that the workers are going to kid—"

"Leave us!" Agatha shouted, her face reddened with rage and her eyes wrathful in their stare.

Peter left.

The Mayoress resumed her silence which, Beatrice knew, could be much more efficacious than a ranting outburst.

"I—I didn't tell you," the girl said, turning slowly, "because. . . well, because Clark Thompson is one of the leaders."

She looked down at the floor guiltily.

The thunderous response Beatrice expected didn't materialize. When she looked up, Agatha was half-smiling.

"Of course you know," the Mayoress said softly, "that you'll be disqualified for this. And you and your Clark and the other leaders will be punished—the men much more severely, indeed, than you. . . Who are the other two?"

Beatrice told her. Then she looked imploringly into the Mayoress' eyes. "I couldn't help it, Agatha! I didn't want you to know about Clark. I knew there would be a revolt in the Square at the inauguration. But I also knew your guards would be able to take care of it. I thought I would find a way to see Clark before the inauguration and talk him out of it; maybe even lie to him and say you knew all about it and it couldn't succeed."

At least, Beatrice realized as she hid a brief elation, the informer had been stopped short of telling Agatha that kidnapping girls would be the main purpose of the rebellion. The Mayoresses still didn't know that. If Beatrice could keep it from her, Clark would still manage to escape execution as a first-degree seditionist.

Agatha sneered and made a disgruntled sound. "Love! See what it gets you? You've been warned since you were a child not to fall in love with a man; to regard them with cold disdain, even contempt."

"But I can still stop the revolt,

Agatha!" Beatrice pleaded frantically. "Just let me see Clark. Let me talk with him. . . I can make him understand. He loves me; I know it! He'll listen. He'll—"

Her importunate outpouring stalled before the chilling effects of the Mayoress' arduous stare.

"Stop the revolt?" Agatha questioned, smiling. "By all means no . . . So they are going to rebel in the Square? They're going to form a compact defensive formation, armed with tools from the foundry, and defy me?"

She was pacing now, an eager stare animating her face. "In an open square surrounded by tall buildings they are going to hurl threats at me. Well, we shall see about that! We shall teach them a bitter lesson in the tactics of defense and attack."

Pausing, she turned toward Beatrice "And you, my dear, shall be there to see it all. The pre-inauguration activities will go on as planned—even the preparation for the formalities on this side of the river — so the workers won't suspect that I'm ready for their rebellion."

Without showing it, Beatrice was grateful for the Mayoress' decision. Clark would not be with the other workers when the guards opened the attack. He would be at the foot of the stage, as custom demanded. He would be immedi-

ately restrained by the cordon protecting the women. And the rebellion would fail even before the workers could consider striking out for the ferries to raid the women's quarters. Agatha would probably never know that the uprising had been aimed principally at kidnaping girls. Seeing that they had failed, the workers certainly wouldn't unnecessarily confess they had intended a raid across the river.

Abruptly, there was additional hope. Suppose Agatha would exact her punishment in banishment? Suppose she would exile her and Clark?

CHAPTER XI

CEDRIC THREW more oil-soaked rags on the pile in the center of the roof, then went over to join Art at the edge. Cautiously, they looked out over the parapet wall.

Below, workers were still entering the Square. In the distance, two more ferries were docking and disgorging squads of guards from across the river. Armed with clubs, they hastily made their way through the deserted, narrow street.

It was a serene morning. Unlike workers gathering for other inaugurations in the past, the men in the Square were silent . . . as silent as were the scores of guards who already surrounded the area.

Dislodged from their feeding grounds, flocks of pigeons flew aimlessly, dodging cornices and lighting on ledges, only to soar off again almost immediately.

"Doesn't look like Agatha expects trouble here," Cedric observed.

Art looked askance at him.

"The guards," the dancer pointed. "There're less than four hundred of them down there . . . You suppose she suspects trouble at the ferries?"

"Nonsense . . . Hell! You worry too much," Art berated. "We've got to take *some* chances . . . Look, there's something that's breaking our way."

He pointed across the river to a large brick building set back a few hundred feet from the levee. "See? They're herding the girls into the schoolhouse for us." He laughed encouragingly.

But Cedric swore. "They suspect! They're getting them together so they can protect them easier!"

Art laughed at the other's nervousness. "According to custom, the new Mayoress—Queen this time—returns across the river immediately after the inauguration. Her first function is to lead her husband before the unmarried—a sort of triumphal return."

The ancient vehicle from which Beatrice had made her announce-

ment rumbled up to the base of the decorated platform. Agatha and Beatrice were in the rear seat and the new ruler's eight maids clung to precarious perches on the rusty hood and trunk. A guard helped them up on the stage, then pulled the ladder down and carried it off as the women took their seats.

Art watched Clark come on the scene with another score of guards and take his place immediately before the stage. Beatrice bent over toward him, but Agatha caught her arm roughly.

Cedric went over to the pile of rags. "Light it now?"

"Wait till they start. I'll give you a signal."

Like a deflating balloon, the workers collapsed in upon the center of the Square as Agatha rose to start the ceremonies.

A single worker stepped out of the tight formation. He reached back under the tails of his full-dress coat and the curving blade of a sickle flashed in the sunlight as he thrust it above his head.

"No segregation!" he shouted.

"Now?" Cedric asked.

There was tense silence in the square, broken only by the sound of steel as tools and cutting instruments flashed above the heads of the compacted workers.

Art waved his hand in a negative gesture, observing puzzledly that the guards ringing the Square

had not attacked the rebels.

But abruptly there was a tremendous clamor of breaking glass. It came from nearly all of the buildings facing on the open block.

"That solves the puzzle of the missing guards," Art said, watching the destruction from within of more windows on the third and fourth floors of the buildings.

The glass barriers cleared away, missiles—boards, bricks, lengths of rusty pipe, furniture — cascaded down from the windows, arching into the mass of workers in a steady barrage.

"Now!" Art shouted. "And then get on over to the ferry landing."

Cedric lit the fire.

SO THAT'S WHERE the guards were concealed, Hank mused, staring out the window of his tenth-storey hiding place. There must have been over two thousand of them planted in the building during the night.

Below, the dumbfounded workers were starting to flee from the missile-flayed center of the Square. But the hurlers suddenly altered their tactics and began pelting the fringes of the dispersing formation, forcing the rebels back toward the center where hundreds of them had already fallen.

Now guards were issuing from the buildings to join the cordon around the area that stood ready to

attack as soon as the artillery assault was over.

Movement near the river in the distance caught Hank's eye. He stared toward the docks. Horse- and cow-drawn vehicles were plunging from the upraised doors of several warehouses! The wagons were filled with men and were being driven toward the ferry landing several blocks away.

He tensed in sudden realization. So *that* was how they were going to do it! Naturally, as he had suspected, a rebellious formation of workers couldn't fight off Agatha's guards and stage a raid across the river at the same time. He should have known they would either split their force, or draw in help from outside to seize the ferries while the fight was going on in the Square.

And Agatha hadn't suspected the maneuver! There was no doubt that all her guards were consigned to the fight below.

He had to warn her.

He turned and raced for the door.

CLARK, IMMEDIATELY in front of the stage, stared in disbelief at the carnage. He'd had no idea it would be like this! He had expected there would be a bitter fight, but he had hoped it would be confined to hand-to-hand combat. There was no doubt now,

though, that Agatha's guards were under instructions to exact a sadistic penalty for the resistance.

Demoralized, the workers were no longer the target of missiles from the buildings. Now they were desperately trying to fight off the peripheral assault that mounted as more guards lunged from darkened doorways.

Hand-to-hand combat, a few dozen injured, not more than two or three unavoidable fatalities — that would not have been too severe a price to pay for acquiring the partial population of a new city that would hold the hopes of rescuing civilization.

But there were scores dying! And the anguished cries and derisive shouts of fighting and wounded men were an incriminating roar in his ears. He should have listened to his sense of reason that had tried to warn him of the consequences after he had been proclaimed the victor in the arena. He should have gone to Agatha. All this would have been prevented.

Restlessly, he backed to the stage and advanced again almost to the line of guards that was there to protect the women. He had to get past them! The raid across the river could wait. If Art and Cedric had a fighting force, it was needed *here* to prevent Agatha's police action from becoming a slaughter. The raid could

wait. It would not be molested by the decimated workers who would remain.

He tensed for a lunge through the cordon. But several of the guards were facing inward. Two of them raised their clubs and threateningly motioned him back.

He relaxed, frustrated. Apparently, they were under instruction to protect him too; to see that he didn't become involved in the vicious fighting. Or were they? Wasn't it possible that their orders were to constrain him; to prevent him from escaping? Did Agatha know he was a leader of the rebellion? Had Hank gotten the information through to her after all?

Helplessly, he turned his back to the fighting; tried to reason with himself . . . The price was *not* too high to pay for the salvation of civilization. One-one was good. One-one was worth sacrifices. In general, it was worth sacrifices on the part of the men who were too complacent to oppose twenty-one-to-one and were therefore chiefly responsible for the perpetuation of the perverted system . . . These were the arguments he had used over and over again during the sleepless night to convince himself that he had chosen wisely. And now, these were the convictions that must not be lost during their initial testing.

HE was instantly aware that his name was being called in a voice that barely carried above the din of battle. He looked up sharply.

Beatrice, stark concern on her face, was bending down over the edge of the platform.

"Run, Clark!" she shouted, seeing that she had his attention. "Agatha knows! She knows you're a leader!"

She glanced fearfully behind her as he frowned up into her face. Then she cupped her hands about her mouth, lowered her desperate voice. "She may find out about —" She tilted her head in the direction of the ferry landing.

A flabby hand grasped her wrist and pulled her from his line of sight.

Stupefied, he backed away. Beatrice knew! She knew about the raid!

"Your Honor! Your Honor!"

The shouting voice came from his rear. He whirled around.

Hank was racing toward the corner of guards, his arms upraised in a gesture that may have conveyed surrender or harmless intent.

Puzzled, Clark raced forward to meet him, but drew up short of the line of guards; glanced back at the Mayoress. She was intently interested in the fighting, unaware of anything else. But she still maintained her grip on Beatrice's

wrist.

"The river!" Hank shouted, still running. "The ferries! Your Honor!"

Still Agatha hadn't heard.

The guards were all facing away from the platform now, misgivingly watching the approaching worker. Clark lunged between a pair of them and rushed out to intercept Hank. The other, intent on getting his warning through to the Mayoress, was apparently unaware of Clark's charge until only a few feet separated them. Still running, Clark crouched and drove his shoulder into his abdomen.

They went down together. But the impetus of Clark's charge had taken them back toward the center of the Square, closer to the line of fighting.

Hank *couldn't* be allowed to get through to Agatha, he told himself desperately as he hurled a fist into the other's face while they rolled over on the ground.

The typist kicked out; caught him in the stomach, and Clark doubled in pain. Then the other was on his feet, whirling to resume his dash for the platform.

Clark reached out frantically and caught his ankle; hauled him back to the ground. Then they both regained their feet and Clark forced him back with an underhanded blow to the chest and another to the face.

Hank toppled back and into the melee. One of the attacking guards caught his arm, swung him around and brought his club chopping down.

CHAPTER XII

ONE BLOCK from the river, the first of the onrushing wagons turned onto the street leading to the ferry landing and the driver cracked his whip, urging the team of horses to an even greater speed.

Two startled guards leaped out of the way as the wagon clattered across the ramp and onto the ferry. Three other vehicles followed, pulling up next to the engine house.

A score of guards and six of the boat's crew rushed the first wagon. But the driver wasn't the only one armed with a whip. The ferry defenders gave way before the staccato cracks of a dozen lashes.

Pressing their fearsome attack, the raiders leaped from the vehicle and drove the defenders still farther back — back — until they toppled over the railless edge of the deck to escape the vicious, cutting whips.

In precise timing, more than forty other wagons drew up on the dock, spilling out their hundreds of raiders.

Grinning in satisfaction, Cedric

and the complement of three wagons watched the action as the raiders charged the pilot's house; saw the skippers cringe in terror before slicing, snapping leather. He raised his arms in surrender and went back into the pilot's house with several of his captors.

Its deck jammed with farmers and former workers from Cincy, the ferry pulled off a moment later, disappearing into the persistent mist toward the opposite shore and the other ferry.

BACKING AWAY from the melee, Clark watched Hank being swallowed up by the imbroglio of flailing arms, swinging weapons and heaving bodies.

"Clark! Clark!" An excited voice to his left was calling his name. "Get out of there, you damned fool!"

It was Art who was sprinting forward, glancing apprehensively at a bulge in the line of attack that threatened to encompass them.

But abruptly arms seized Clark from behind; wrested him back toward the platform.

"The other!" he heard Agatha shout. "Get the other one too!"

As the guards from the platform cordon turned him around to lead him back, he saw Agatha pointing to Art. But the latter made no attempt to escape as four guards went out to grab him and bring him

back into their circle.

Surprisingly calm, Art leaned against the bracework of the platform, returning the stare of his captors.

"See anything of Cedric yet?" he asked Clark.

"No. And I don't imagine we will. He's probably across the river by now. It seems to me there's no reason to come back here."

Art took exception to the observation. "Doesn't seem that way to me." He nodded toward the platform. "Beatrice and eight other eligible girls are up there. He won't pass them up."

"Agatha knows you and I are involved in all this," Clark offered.

"I guessed as much when she had me hauled in here. But apparently she doesn't know that what's going on here is in the nature of a sideshow. She can't be holding any more guards in reserve."

There was an abrupt scream above them and a form came hurtling down from the platform; landed on the ground in front of them.

It was Beatrice.

She was dazed and distraught, but apparently unhurt, Clark surmised as he knelt beside her, then helped her up.

"Watch them—all of them!" Agatha ordered from above, pointing down at them.

The guards tightened their ring, but made no move to seize the girl

and the two men.

Beatrice clung to Clark, her face buried against his chest. But finally the tremors that were shaking her body subsided.

"I tried to talk with you," she said, backing away, "but Agatha wouldn't let me. She's going to punish us. There was a man who told her who the leaders were."

"Punish *us*?" Clark asked, puzzled.

"I knew about the revolt and I didn't tell her. She found out."

"You *knew*? And you didn't say anything?—Why?"

"I thought I would get a chance to talk you out of the rebellion. All night I hoped I would be able to see you before the inauguration and tell you to give up—to confess everything to Agatha and maybe she'd go easy on us."

"But you told me to *run*," he reminded.

"I said I had thought *all night* about telling you to give up." She looked intently into his eyes. "But by the time morning came, I wanted to say something different. I wanted to tell where your raiders could find the girls when they got to the other side of the river."

Astounded, Clark backed away. "You think one-one—I mean—You'd agree to—"

Art chuckled. "Some of them come around faster than others. It all depends on the amount of

counter-influence and the degree to which they are subconsciously weary of the old system."

Beatrice nodded almost imperceptibly, looked down at the ground.

"The raiders *know* where the girls are," Art offered. "We were on top of the hotel and saw them go into the schoolhouse."

THE TWO FERRIES were docked bow to stern on the other side of the river and a line of defense consisting of perhaps a hundred men waited restlessly on the wharf, the lengths of their lashes lying idly at their feet. But they were unchallenged.

As their impatience mounted, they were encouraged by the sound of snapping whipcords and the frightened screams of girls from over the levee.

Two lines of whipmen, single file, broke over the top of the embankment first. Their lashes crackled repeatedly as, between the lines, a disheveled group of girls stumbled up and over the crest and back down its other side.

More whipmen came into view behind the captives filling the air with the dreadful cracking of scores of lashes. But the girls managed easily to keep out of reach of the leather, despite their panic-stricken reaction.

A final rear-guard detail backed over the levee, using their whips to

hold off a meager handful of men, most of them elderly, who exhibited but little interest in closing the distance between themselves and the raiders.

Jason opened a gap in the formation of defenders on the dock to let the girls through. The raid had been more successful than he had anticipated. Certainly there were more than five hundred in the group of captives. Many of them were children, he realized, but a delay of eight or ten years in certain specific cases mattered little—compared with the wait of hundreds of years that had gone before. And there would be other cities to fall; other captives to be brought to Sanlou, And, eventually, other Sanlous to be populated with more voluntary and involuntary converts to one-one.

"Hurry it up!" he shouted above the wails of the girls.

Audrey and the other women and farm children would be waiting on the flats beyond the bend in the river. They would start worrying soon.

Seemingly in jubilation, the ferry whistles blew. Then the two crafts chugged off downstream.

CEDRIC GRIPPED the reins with tight, moist hands, bouncing in the seat as the wagon's right wheels struck the curb in swinging onto Main Street.

The maneuver would have to be quick. There would be only seconds before the defenders would solve the method of attack. And there was much to be done . . . Clark would be at the platform. But what about Art? Would *he* have been able to fight his way across the Square so that he could be close to the platform too?

Cedric glanced back. The second and third wagons had made the turn and were close behind, a score of men clinging to the side railings of each, their lashes ready.

Ahead, the fight was still in progress. But even as the three contingents of raiders surged forward in their vehicles, the decrescendo in the noises of battle became noticeable.

They reached the Square and the wagons selected divergent courses to ring the platform. Pounding hoofs and cracking whips scattered the ring of guards before each carriage.

Abruptly, Cedric saw the two men and the girl standing in front of the stage. He sent his wagon rumbling in their direction as several of the guards, realizing the objective of the raiders, rushed over to seize Beatrice and the two men with her.

But a barrier of swishing leather was thrown up between the trio and the guards, forcing the latter back and away from the platform.

The Square reverberated with the explosive sound of snapping whipcords that denied the guards an opportunity to approach the wagons.

On the other side of the platform, the second wagon had drawn up against the structure and half of the vehicle's complement had clambered up the sides and onto the stage. The other half sustained the barrage of lashes.

Clark and Art helped Beatrice up the side of Cedric's wagon while the raiders on that carriage momentarily slackened their thong attack to let them through.

"They finished yet?" Art asked, nodding toward the other wagons as he stood behind Cedric.

"Getting the last one off now."

A counter-barrage of missiles, hurled by frustrated defenders who could not get through the shield of leather, halted abruptly as the girls were hauled from the platform.

Clark, his arm around Beatrice's waist, turned toward the stage. Agatha stood alone there now. She was shouting frenziedly at the wagons on the other side as they pulled away.

The Mayoress bent over to make her words better heard.

Laughing mischievously, Cedric drew back his whip, took aim, and snapped the handle forward.

The whipcord arched up and

over the edge of the platform, its stinging tip skillfully finding the mark.

Agatha straightened with a brief scream.

Then the wagon lurched forward to join the other two in withdrawal.

TWENTY MINUTES later, sixty-two men stood anxiously on a jetty two miles downriver, watching the massive hulk of a ferry float ponderously toward them. Several of them gripped the arms of eight girls who had ceased struggling.

Away from the larger assemblage, three men and another girl formed a smaller group. One of the men held the girl's hand. Confused, he looked at the other two men.

"Not going with us?" Clark asked. "I don't understand."

"Jason and others in the party know how to get where you're headed," Art explained. "We won't be needed."

"We're going to push on," Cedric added.

"But where?"

"This was only one city," Art glanced back at the tired skyscrapers rearing up behind the stand of young pines. "Over there—" he nodded toward the east, "—there are more. Bigger cities. Some of them with populations still over thirty thousand."

"But you were going to help build up Sanlou!" Clark protested.

"Sanlou will build itself up," Cedric assured. "Art and I aren't the only team in the field. There are others working. We don't know whether they'll succeed or not—"

"I got a hunch they will," Art interrupted.

"—But some of them are bound to," Cedric went on. "That means there'll be more forced migrations to Sanlou. And, later on, there'll be more Sanlous to start receiving parties from other disintegrating cities. Things will go fast now that we've got a start."

The ferry reached the jetty and pulled up against it. The raiders brought their eight captives aboard.

"Anyway," Art said, "we've got to stay around here a few weeks to see that the indoctrination of the workers left behind gets started right."

"By the time another city's set to fall," Cedric offered, "they'll be ready to learn how to use a whip."

Almost reluctantly, Clark went aboard, his arm around Beatrice's waist to help her onto the deck of the ferry. They walked over to the bow railing.

Beatrice was trembling slightly. He pulled her closer and she steadied. The wind sweeping down the channel of the river caught her hair and fluffed it in his face. He smiled; made no attempt to push

it away.

"Clark." Her voice was almost a whisper.

He looked down at her expectantly.

"I'd like at least three-girls," she said, watching the water flow be-

neath and around the prow.

"At least," he agreed.

In silence, they stared eagerly ahead to see what would come in view around the next bend—and the next.

THE END

Secrets of the Decade

by

R. G. St. Clair



WITH the world poised on the brink of a Third World War—which may or may not be averted—it is no wonder that secrecy is the order of the day. In two fields of theoretical and applied science, it is almost impossible to get anything but the most trivial information—and yet it is in nuclear engineering and in rocketry that the greatest, most interesting advances will be made in this coming decade.

Rocketry, which means to most "practical" people, "guided missiles", must be developing at a fantastic rate, yet to watch the papers, you would rarely conclude that anything is being done. The lack of information brings to mind the amusing remark of the technician who said: "The trouble with guided missiles is that there ain't any!" Naturally this is a half-truth and today guided missiles are quite a few stages beyond the drawing board. The most interesting hint as to their development is given by a recent announcement (accompan-

ied by a fascinating picture) that Oerlikon, the famous Swiss cannon firm, is building a huge plant in the United States for the production of an anti-aircraft, anti-rocket, guided missile.

The picture showed something out of a science-fictionist's dream. A long slim tube, clearly a rocket, finned and pointed, and looking like the head of Satan, rested in a launching cradle mounted on rotatable, adjustable carriage. Nearby, and attached to this apparatus was elaborate radar equipment.

It was announced that this guided missile, completely automatically aimed and fired, could bring down almost any aircraft—or rocket—from inconceivable altitudes. Its speed was fabulous and it was equipped with proximity fuse and a course-alterer designed to enable it to literally "hunt" an enemy plane.

If such news could be released, just imagine what still is secret!

The second of the atomic-powered submarines is about to go on the

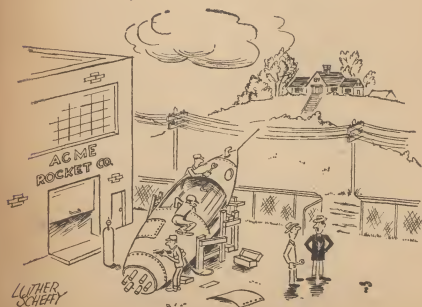
ways. The first is now completed, and anyone can tell if the authorities are ready to go *that far*, the first must already be a profound success. The application of nuclear engineering to ships and submarines is a harbinger of what is to come for aircraft, rockets and power plants. By 1965, we are going to see some technological advances which will seem incredible.

Several European nations, unable to afford the luxury of developing atomic bombs, have devoted their extremely limited nuclear resources

to applied industrial engineering, and already one huge office building is being heated by this inexhaustible energy-source. Here, at present, plans are being worked on for an atomic electric power plant—full-size and not a pilot plant model.

As for the biological sciences, where secrecy does not count—we think!—we are just on the verge of learning. Probably in the end, it will be from these biological labs, that the real miracles will come ...

* * *



"Pardon me, but I live up on the hill and there's something I want to talk to you about!"

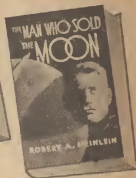
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INTRODUCING The Author

★ Daniel F. Galouye ★

(Concluded from Page 2)

Naturally these extensions of imagination were all of fantastic or pseudo-scientific nature, for I had been introduced to science fiction even before the jackets were worn off my first high school books.

It wasn't long before the "fictionized" news or feature stories began finding their way on paper. Bill Hamling was the victim of the first attempt a few years ago. Only he knows what he did to deserve it, but he fell prey additionally to the second effort. Even with suggested rewriting, Number Two missed the mark also. Before consigning it to the wastepaper basket, however, I reread it. A speech of one of the characters stood out as though written in Braille: "But under these circumstances how can we be sure anything at all is real?"

That did it! The manuscript joined the trash pile. But the page with the quotation didn't. Like a mushroom, it grew rapidly—into my first published novel—in the May 1952 IMAGINATION (big sister of IMAGINATIVE TALES). Since then I've had stories in quite a few books.

The fiction writing venture, though, is the completion of a cycle that started with the non-too-tactful

rejection by a science fiction editor (I don't remember whom) of two stories (?) written in 1935, when I was fifteen. Comments on the rejection slips convinced me that if I was going to write it would have to be in the straight news field. That led to a BA in journalism in 1941 at Louisiana State University. Receipt of the degree, however, was delayed a half-year to allow time for satisfaction of a desire to study astronomy, physics, geology and anthropology.

Then there was a brief venture into the newspaper and book editing fields, a tour of duty with the Naval Air Corps as cadet, flight instructor, test pilot and transport pilot in the Pacific, return to New Orleans, wedding bells, reassimilation into the newspaper profession and the addition of two little distractions named Denise and Jeanne.

With the cycle completed I'm smugly content. If you enjoy reading "Over The River . . ." only partly as much as I enjoyed writing it, I shall feel satisfied with the possibility that you'll invite me back to the pages of IMAGINATIVE TALES.

—Daniel F. Galouye

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